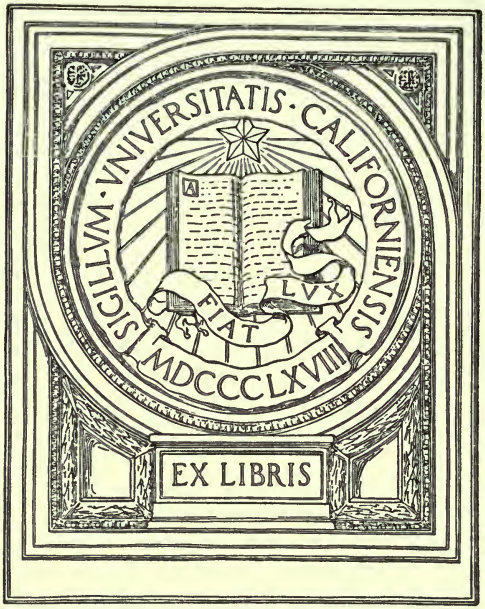
The Wheel of Life

Ellen Glasgow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Susie E. Clark

Christmas 1906

BY THE
SAME AUTHOR

THE DELIVERANCE

THE BATTLE-GROUND

THE FREEMAN, AND OTHER POEMS

THE VOICE OF THE PEOPLE

PHASES OF AN INFERIOR PLANET

THE DESCENDANT

The Wheel of Life

By

ELLEN GLASGOW

UNIV. OF CALIFORNIA

New York
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Part I

IMPULSE

CHAPTER I

In Which the Romantic Hero is Conspicuous by His Absence

AS THE light fell on her face Gerty Bridewell awoke, stifled a yawn with her pillow, and remembered that she had been very unhappy when she went to bed. That was only six hours ago, and yet she felt now that her unhappiness and the object of it, which was her husband, were of less disturbing importance to her than the fact that she must get up and stand for three minutes under the shower bath in her dressing-room. With a sigh she pressed the pillow more firmly under her cheek, and lay looking a little wistfully at her maid, who, having drawn back the curtains at the window, stood now regarding her with the discreet and confidential smile which drew from her a protesting frown of irritation.

"Well, I can't get up until I've had my coffee," she said in a voice which produced an effect of mournful brightness rather than of anger, "I haven't the strength to put so much as my foot out of bed."

Her eyes followed the woman across the room and through the door, and then, turning instinctively to the broad mirror above her dressing table, hung critically upon the brilliant red and white reflection in the glass. It was her comforting assurance

that every woman looked her best in bed; and as she lay now, following the lines of her charming figure beneath the satin coverlet, she found herself wondering, not without resentment, why the possession of a beauty so conspicuous should afford her only a slight and temporary satisfaction. Last week a woman whom she knew had had her nose broken in an automobile accident, and as she remembered this it seemed to her that the mere fact of her undisfigured features was sufficient to be the cause of joyful gratitude. But this, she knew, was not so, for her face was perfectly unharmed; and yet she felt that she could hardly have been more miserable, even with a broken nose.

Here she paused for an instant in order to establish herself securely in her argument, for, though she could by no stretch of the imagination regard her mind as of a meditative cast, there are hours when even to the most flippant experience wears the borrowed mantle of philosophy. Abstract theories of conduct diverted her but little; what she wanted was some practical explanation of the mental weariness she felt. What she wanted, she repeated, as if to drive in the matter with a final blow, was to be as happy in the actual condition as she had told herself that she might be when as yet the actual was only the ideal. Why, for instance, when she had been wretched with but one man on the box, should the addition of a second livery fail to produce in her the contentment of which she had often dreamed while she disconsolately regarded a single pair of shoulders? That happiness did not masquerade in livery she had learned since she had triumphantly married the

richest man she knew, and the admission of this brought her almost with a jump to the bitter conclusion of her unanswerable logic—for the satisfaction which was not to be found in a footman was absent as well from the imposing figure of Perry Bridewell himself. Yet she told herself that she would have married him had he possessed merely the historical penny, and the restless infatuation of those first months was still sufficiently alive to lend the colour of its pleasing torment to her existence.

Lying there, in her French embroidered night dress, with her brilliant red hair pushed back from her forehead, she began idly to follow the histories of the people whom she knew, and it seemed to her that each of them was in some particular circumstance more fortunate than she. But she would have changed place with none, not even with her best friend, Laura Wilde, who was perfectly content because she lived buried away in Gramercy Park and wrote vague beautiful verse that nobody ever read. Laura filled as little part in what she called "the world" as Gramercy Park occupied in modern progress, yet it was not without a faint impulse of envy that Gerty recalled now the grave old house mantled in brown creepers and the cheerful firelit room in which Laura lived. The peace which she had missed in the thought of her husband came back to her with the first recollection of her friend, and her hard bright eyes softened a little while she dwelt on the vivid face of the woman to whom she clung because of her very unlikeness to herself. Gradually out of the mist of her unhappiness the figure of Laura rose in the mirror before her, and she saw clearly her large white forehead under the

dark wing-like waves of hair, the singular intentness of her eyes, and the rapt expectancy of look in which her features were lost as in a general vagueness of light.

Though it was twenty years since she had first seen Laura Wilde as a child of ten, the meeting came to her suddenly with all the bright clearness of an incident of yesterday. She remembered herself as a weak, bedraggled little girl, in wet slippers, who was led by a careless nurse to a strange German school; and she felt again the agony of curiosity with which, after the first blank wonder was over, she had stared at the children who hung whispering together in the centre of the room. As she looked a panic terror seized her like a wild beast, and she threw up her hands and turned to rush away to the reassuring presence of grown up creatures, when from the midst of the whispering group a little dark girl, in an ugly brown frock, ran up to her and folded her in her arms.

"I shall love you best of all because you are so beautiful," said the little dark girl, "and I will do all your sums and even eat your sausage for you." Then she had kissed her and brought her to the stove and knelt down on the floor to take off her wet slippers. To this day Gerty had always thought of her friend as the little girl who had shut her eyes and gulped down those terrible sausages for her behind her teacher's back.

The maid brought the coffee, and while she sat up to drink it the door of her husband's dressing-room opened and he came in and stood, large, florid and impressive, beside her bed.

"I'm afraid I shan't get back to luncheon," he remarked, as he settled his ample, carefully groomed body in his clothes with a comfortable shake, "there's a chap from the country Pierce has sent to me with a letter and I'll be obliged to feed him at the club, but—to tell the truth—there's so little one can get really fit at this season."

To a man for whom the pleasures of the table represented the larger share of his daily enjoyment, this was a question not without a serious importance of its own; and while he paused to settle it he stood, squaring his chest, with an expression of decided annoyance on his handsome, good-humored face. Then, having made a satisfactory choice of dishes, his features recovered their usual look of genial contentment, and he felt carelessly in his pocket for the letter which he presently produced and laid on Gerty's pillow. His life had corresponded so evenly with his bodily impulses that the perfection of the adjustment had produced in him the amiable exterior of an animal that is never crossed. It was a case in which supreme selfishness exerted the effect of personality.

Leaving the letter where he had placed it, Gerty sat sipping her coffee while she looked up at him with the candid cynicism which lent a piquant charm to the almost doll-like regularity of her features.

"You did not get three hours sleep and yet you're so fresh you smell of soap," she observed as an indignant protest, "while I've had six and I'm still too tired to move."

"Oh, I'm all right—I never let myself get seedy," returned Perry, with his loud though pleasant laugh. "That's the mistake all you women make."

Half closing her eyes Gerty leaned back and surveyed him with a curious detachment—almost as if he were an important piece of architecture which she had been recommended to admire and to which she was patiently trying in vain to adjust her baffled vision. The smaller she screwed her gaze the more remotely magnificent loomed his proportions.

"How you manage it is more than I can understand," she said.

Perry stared for a moment in an amiable vacancy at the coffee pot. Then she watched the animation move feebly in his face, while he pulled at his short fair moustache with a characteristic masculine gesture. Physically, she admitted, he had never appeared to a better advantage in her eyes.

"By the way, I had a game of billiards with Kemper and we talked pretty late," he said, as if evolving the explanation for which she had not asked. "He got back from Europe yesterday you know."

"He did?" Her indifferent gaiety played like harmless lightning around his massive bulk. "Then we may presume, I suppose, on Madame Alta for the opera season?"

He met the question with an admiring chuckle. "Do you really mean you think he's been abroad with her all this time?"

"Well, what else did he get his divorce for?" she demanded, with the utter disillusion of knowledge which she had found to be her most effective pose.

Perry's chuckle swelled suddenly into a roar. "Good Lord, how women talk!" he burst out. "Why, Arnold has been divorced ten years and he never laid eyes on Jennie Alta till she sang over here three

years ago. There was nothing in it except that he liked to be seen with a celebrity—most men do. But, my dear girl," he concluded in a kind of awful reverence, "what a tongue you've got. It's a jolly good thing for me that I'm your husband or you wouldn't leave me a blessed patch of reputation to my back."

His humor held him convulsed for several minutes, during which interval Gerty continued to regard him with her piquant cynicism.

"Well, if it wasn't Madame Alta it was somebody who is voiceless," she retorted coolly. "I merely meant that there must have been a reason."

"Oh, your 'reasons'!" ejaculated Perry. Then he stooped and gave the letter lying on Gerty's pillow a filip from his large pink forefinger. "You haven't told me what you think of this?" he said.

Picking up the letter Gerty unfolded it and read it slowly through from start to finish, the little ripple of sceptical amusement crossing and recrossing her parted lips,

RAVENS NEST,
Fauquier County, Virginia,
December 26, 19—.

My Dear Perry: Nobody, of course, ever accused you of being literary, nor, thank Heaven, have I fallen under that aspersion—but, since the shortest road to success seems to be by circumvention, it has occurred to me that you might give a social shove or two to the chap who will hand you this letter sometime after the New Year.

His name is St. George Trent, he was born a little way up the turnpike from me, has an enchanting mother, and shows symptoms of being already inoculated with the literary plague. I never read books, so I have no sense of comparative values in literature, and consequently can't tell whether

he is an inglorious Shakespeare or a subject for the dail press. His mother assures me that he has already writte a play worthy to stand beside Hamlet—but, though she a charming lady, I'm hardly convinced by her opinion. Th fact remains, however, that he is going to New York to becom a playwright, and that he has two idols in the market pla which, I fancy, you may be predestined to see demolishe He is simply off his head to meet Roger Adams, the edit of *The*—something or other I never heard of—and—rememb your budding days and be charitable—a lady who writ poems and signs herself Laura Wilde. I prepared hi for the inevitable catastrophe by assuring him that th harmless Mr. Adams eats with his knife, and that the lad as she writes books, isn't worth much at love-making—th purpose for which woman was created by God and cultivate by man. Alas, though, the young are a people of gre faith!

Commend me to Mrs. Bridewell, whom I haven't seen sin I had the honour of assisting at the wedding.

Yours ever,

BEVERLY PIERCE.

As she finished her reading, Gerty broke into laugh and carelessly threw the letter aside on th blue satin quilt.

"I'm glad to hear that somebody has read Laura poems," she observed.

"But what in thunder am I to do with the chap? enquired Perry. "God knows I don't go in fo literature, and that's all he's good for I dare say."

"Oh, well, he can eat, I guess," commented Gert with consoling irony.

"I've asked Roger Adams to luncheon," pursue Perry, too concerned to resent her lack of sympath "but there are nine chances to one that he will sta away."

"Experience has taught me," rejoined Gert

sweetly, "that your friend Adams can be absolutely counted on to stay away. Do you know," she resumed after a moment's thought, "that, though he's probably the brainiest man of our acquaintance, I sometimes seriously wonder what you see in him."

A flush of anger darkened Perry's clear skin, and this sudden change gave him an almost brutal look. "I'd like to know if I'm a blamed fool?" he demanded.

Her merriment struck pleasantly on his ears. "Do you want to destroy the illusion in which I married you?" she asked. "It was, after all, simply the belief that size is virtue."

The flush passed, and he took in a full breath which expanded his broad chest. "Well, I'm big enough," he answered, "but it isn't Adam's fault that he hasn't got my muscle."

With a leisurely glance in the mirror, he settled his necktie in place, twisted the short ends of his moustache, and then stooped to kiss his wife before going out.

"Don't you let yourself get seedy and lose your looks," he said as he left the room.

When he had gone she made a sudden ineffectual effort to rise from bed; then as if oppressed by a fatigue that was moral rather than physical, she fell back again and turned her face wearily from the mirror. So the morning slipped away, the luncheon hour came and went, and it was not until the afternoon that she gathered energy to dress herself and begin anew the inevitable and agonising pursuit of pleasure. The temptation of the morning had been to let go—to relax in despair from the fruitlessness of her endeavor—and the result of this brief withdrawal was

apparent in the order which she gave the footman before the open door of her carriage.

"To Miss Wilde's first"—the words ended abruptly and she turned eagerly, with outstretched hand, to a man who had hurried toward her from the corner of Fifth Avenue.

"So you haven't forgotten me in six months, Arnold," she said, with a sweetness in which there was an almost imperceptible tone of bitterness.

He took her hand in both of his, pressing it for an instant in a quick muscular grasp which had in it something of the nervous vigor that lent a peculiar vibrant quality to his voice.

"And I couldn't have done it in six years," he replied, as a singularly charming smile illumined his forcible rather than regular features, and brought out the genial irony in his expressive light gray eyes. "If I'd gone to Europe to forget you it would have been time thrown away, but I had something better on my hands than that—I've been buying French racing automobiles——"

As he finished he gave an impatient jerk to the carriage door, a movement which, like all his gestures, sprang from the nervous energy that found its outlet in the magnetism of his personality. People sometimes said that he resembled Perry Bridewell, who was, in fact, his distant cousin, but the likeness consisted solely in a certain evident possession of virile power—a quality which women are accustomed to describe as masculine. He was not tall, and yet he gave an impression of bigness; away from him one invariably thought of him as of unusual proportions, but, standing by his side, he was found to be hardly

above the ordinary height. The development of his closely knit figure, the splendid breadth of his chest and shoulders, the slight projection of his heavy brows and the almost brutal strength of his jaw and chin, all combined to emphasise that appearance of ardent vitality which has appealed so strongly to the imagination of women. Seen in repose there was a faint suggestion of cruelty in the lines of his mouth under his short brown moustache, but this instead of detracting from the charm he exercised only threw into greater relief the genial brightness of his smile.

Now Gerty, glancing up at him, remembered a little curiously, the whispered reason for his long absence. There was always a woman in the wind when it blew rumours of Kemper, though he was generally considered to regard the sex with the blithe indifference of a man to whom feminine favour has come easily. How easily Gerty had sometimes wondered, though she had hardly ventured so much as a dim surmise. Ten years, she would have said, was a considerable period from which to date a passion, and she remembered now that ten years ago Kemper had secured a divorce from his wife in some Western court. There had been no particular scandal, no damning charges on either side; and a club wit had remarked at the time that the only possible ground for a separation was the fact that Mrs. Kemper had grown jealous of her husband's after-dinner cigar. Since then other and varied rumours had reached Gerty's ears, until finally there had blown a veritable gale concerning a certain Madame Alta, who sang melting soprano parts in Italian opera. Then this,

too, had passed, and, with the short memory of city livers, Gerty had forgotten alike the gossip and the heroines of the gossip, until she noted now the lines of deeper harassment in Kemper's face. These coming so suddenly after six months of Europe caused her to wonder if the affair with the prima donna had been really an entanglement of the heart.

"Well, I may not be as fast as an automobile," she presently admitted.

"But you're twice as dangerous," he retorted gaily.

For an instant the pleasant humour in his eyes held her speechless.

"Ah, well, you aren't a coward," she answered coolly enough at last. Then her tone changed, and as she settled herself under her fur rugs she made a cordial inviting gesture. "Come in with me and I'll take you to Laura Wilde's," she said; "she's a genius, and you ought to know her before the world finds her out."

With a protesting laugh Kemper held up his gloved finger.

"God forbid!" he exclaimed with a shrug which struck her as a slightly foreign affectation. "The lady may be a female Milton, but Perry tells me that she isn't pretty."

He touched her hand again, met her indignant defence of Laura with a nod of smiling irony, and then, as her carriage started, he turned rapidly down Sixty-ninth Street in the direction of the Park.

In Gerty the chance meeting had awakened a slumbering interest which she had half forgotten, and as she drove down Fifth Avenue toward Laura's

distant home she found herself wondering idly if he would let many days go by before he came again. The thought was still in her mind when the carriage turned into Gramercy Park and stopped before the old brown house hidden in creepers in which Laura lived. So changed by this time, however, was Gerty's mood that, after leaving her carriage, she stood hesitating from indecision upon the sidewalk. The few bared trees in the snow, the solemn, almost ghostly, quiet of the quaint old houses and the deserted streets, in which a flock of sparrows quarrelled under the faint sunshine, produced in her an odd and almost mysterious sense of unreality—as if the place, herself, the waiting carriage, and Laura buried away in the dull brown house, were all creations of some gossamer and dream-like quality of mind. She felt suddenly that the sorrows which had oppressed her in the morning belonged no more to any existence in which she herself had a part. Then, looking up, she saw her husband crossing the street between the two men with whom he had lunched, and even the impressive solidity of Perry Bridewell appeared to her strangely altered and out of place.

He came up, a little breathless from his rapid walk, and it was a minute before he could summon voice to introduce the cheerful, fresh-coloured youth on his right hand.

"I've already told Mrs. Bridewell about you, Mr. Trent," he said at last, "but I'm willing to confess that I haven't told her half the truth."

Gerty met Trent's embarrassed glance with the protecting smile with which she favoured the young who combined his sex with his attractions. Then,

when he was quite at ease again, she turned to speak to Roger Adams, for whom, in spite, as she laughingly said, of the distinction between a bookworm and a butterfly, she was accustomed to admit a more than ordinary liking.

He was a gaunt, scholarly looking man of forty years, with broad, singularly bony shoulders, an expression of kindly humour, and a plain, strong face upon which suffering had left its indelible suggestion of defeated physical purpose. Nothing about him was impressive, nothing even arresting to a casual glance, and not even the shooting light from the keen gray eyes, grown a little wistful from the emotional repression of the man's life, could account for the cordial appeal that spoke through so unimposing a figure. As much of his personal history as Gerty knew seemed to her peculiarly devoid of the interest or the excitement of adventure; and the only facts of his life which she would have found deserving the trouble of repeating were that he had married an impossible woman somewhere in Colorado, and that for ten years he had lived in New York where he edited *The International Review.*

"Perry tells me that Mr. Trent has really read Laura's poems," she said now to Adams with an almost unconscious abandonment of her cynical manner. "Have you examined him and is it really true?"

"I didn't test him because I hoped the report was false," was Adams' answer. "He's welcome to the literary hash, but I want to keep the *caviar* for myself."

"Read them!" exclaimed Trent eagerly, while his

blue eyes ran entirely to sparkles. "Why, I've learned them every one by heart."

"Then she'll let you in," responded Gerty reassuringly, "there's no doubt whatever of your welcome."

"But there is of mine," said Perry gravely, "so I guess I'd better quit."

He made a movement to turn away, but Gerty placing her gloved hand on his arm, detained him by a reproachful look.

"That reminds me of the mischief you have done to-day," she said. "I met Arnold Kemper as I left the house, and when I asked him to come with me what do you suppose was the excuse he gave?"

"The dentist or a twinge of rheumatism?" suggested Adams gravely.

"Neither." Her voice rose indignantly, and she enforced her reprimand by a light stroke on Perry's sleeve. "He actually said that Perry had told him Laura wasn't pretty."

"Well, I take back my words and eat 'em, too," cried Perry.

He broke away in affected terror before Trent's angry eyes, while Gerty gave a joyful little exclamation and waved her hand toward one of the lower windows in the house before which they stood. The head of a woman, framed in brown creepers, appeared there for an instant, and then, almost before Trent had caught a glimpse of the small dark eager figure, melted again into the warm firelight of the interior. A moment later the outer door opened quickly, and Laura stood there with impulsive outstretched hands and the cordial smile which was her priceless inheritance from a Southern mother.

"I knew that you were there even before I looked out of the window," she exclaimed to Gerty, in what Adams had once called her "Creole voice." Then she paused, laughing happily, as she looked, with her animated glance, from Gerty to Trent and from Trent to Adams. To the younger man, full of his enthusiasm and his ignorance, the physical details of her appearance seemed suddenly of no larger significance than the pale bronze gown she wore or the old coffee-coloured lace knotted upon her bosom in some personal caprice of dress. What she gave to him as she stood there, looking from Adams to himself with her ardent friendly glance, was an impression of radiant energy, of abundant life.

She turned back after the first greeting, leading the way into the pleasant firelit room, where a white haired old gentleman with an interesting blanched face rose to receive them.

"I have just proved to Mr. Wilberforce that I could 'feel' you coming," said Laura with a smile as she unfastened Gerty's furs.

"And I have argued that she could quite as well surmise it," returned Mr. Wilberforce, as he fell back into his chair before the wood fire.

"Well, you may know in either way that my coming may be counted on," said Gerty, "for I have sacrificed for you the society of the most interesting man I know."

"What! Is it possible that Perry has been forsaken?" enquired Adams in his voice of quiet humor.

In the midst of her flippant laughter, Gerty turned on him the open cynicism of her smile.

"Now is it possible that Perry has that effect on

you?" she asked with curiosity. "For I find him decidedly depressing."

"Then if it isn't Perry I demand the name," persisted Adams gayly, "though I'm perfectly ready to wager that it's Arnold Kemper."

"Kemper," repeated Laura curiously, as if the name arrested her almost against her will. "Wasn't there a little novel once by an Arnold Kemper—a slight but striking thing with very little grammar and a great deal of audacity?"

"Oh, that was done in his early days," replied Adams, "as a kind of outlet to the energy he now expends in racing motors. I asked Funsten, who does our literary notices, if there was any chance for him again in fiction, and he answered that the only favourable thing he could say of him was to say nothing."

"But he's gone in for automobiles now," said Gerty, "they're so much bigger, after all, he thinks, than books."

"I haven't seen him for fifteen years," remarked Adams, "but I recognise his speech."

"One always recognises his speeches," admitted Gerty, "there's a stamp on them, I suppose, for somehow he himself is great even if his career isn't—and, after all," she concluded seriously, "it is—what shall I call it—the personal quantity that he insists on."

"The personal quantity," repeated Laura laughing, and, as if the description of Kemper had failed to interest her, she turned the conversation upon the subject of Trent's play.

CHAPTER II

Treats of an Eccentric Family

When the last caller had gone Laura slid back the folding doors which opened into the library and spoke to a little old gentleman, with a very bald head, who sat in a big armchair holding a flute in his wrinkled and trembling hand. He had a simple, moonlike face, to which his baldness lent a deceptive appearance of intellect, and his expression was of such bland and smiling goodness that it was impossible to resent the tedious garrulity of his conversation. In the midst of his shrivelled countenance his eyes looked like little round blue buttons which had been set there in order to keep his features from entirely slipping away. He was the oldest member of the Wilde family, and he had lived in the house in Gramercy Park since it was built by his father some sixty years or more ago.

"Tired waiting, Uncle Percival?" asked Laura, raising her voice a little that it might penetrate his deafened hearing.

As he turned upon her his smile of perfect patience the old gentleman nodded his head quickly several times in succession. "I waited to play until after the people went," he responded in a voice that sounded like a cracked silver bell. "Your Aunt Angela has a headache, so she couldn't stand the noise. I went out

to get her some flowers and offered to sit with her, but this is one of her bad days, poor girl." He fell silent for a minute and then added, wistfully, "I'm wondering if you would like to hear 'Ye Banks and Braes o' Bonnie Doon'? It used to be your mother's favourite air."

Though he was an inoffensively amiable and eagerly obliging old man, by some ironic contradiction of his intentions his life had become a series of blunders through which he endeavoured to add his share to the general happiness. His soul was overflowing with humanity, and he spent sleepless nights evolving innocent pleasures for those about him, but his excess of goodness invariably resulted in producing petty annoyances if not serious inconveniences. So his virtues had come to be regarded with timidity, and there was an ever present anxiety in the air as to what Uncle Percival was "doing" in his mind. The fear of inopportune benefits was in its way as oppressive as the dread of unmerited misfortune.

Laura shook her head impatiently as she threw herself into a chair on the other side of the tall bronze lamp upon the writing table. On the stem of an eccentric family tree she was felt to be the perfect flower of artistic impulses, and her enclosed life in the sombre old house had not succeeded in cultivating in her the slightest resemblance to an artificial variety. She was obviously, inevitably, impulsively the original product, and Uncle Percival never realised this more hopelessly than in that unresponsive headshake of dismissal. Laura could be kind, he knew, but she was kind, as she was a poet, when the mood prompted.

"Presently—not now," she said, "I want to talk

to you awhile. Do you know, Aunt Rosa was here again to-day and she still tries to persuade us to sell the house and move uptown. It is so far for her to come from Seventieth Street, she says, but as for me I'd positively hate the change and Aunt Angela can't even stand the mention of it." She leaned forward and stroked his arm with one of her earnest gestures. "What would you do uptown, dear Uncle Percival?" she inquired gently.

The old man laid the flute on his knees, where his shrunken little hands still caressed it. "Do? why I'd die if you dragged me away from my roots," he answered.

Laura smiled, still smoothing him down as if he were an amiable dog. "Well, the Park is very pleasant, you know," she returned, "and it is full of walks, too. You wouldn't lack space for exercise."

"The Park? Pooh!" piped Uncle Percival, raising his voice; "I wouldn't give these streets for the whole of Central Park together. Why, I've seen these pavements laid and relaid for seventy years and I remember all the men who walked over them. Did I ever tell you of the time I strolled through Irving Place with Thackeray? As for Central Park, it hasn't an ounce—not an ounce of atmosphere."

"Oh, well, that settles it," laughed Laura. "We'll keep to our own roots. We are all of one mind, you and Aunt Angela and I."

"I'm sure Angela would never hear of it," pursued Uncle Percival, "and in her affliction how could one expect it?"

For a moment Laura looked at him in a compassionate pause before she made her spring. "There's

nothing in the world the matter with Aunt Angela," she said; "she's perfectly well."

Blank wonder crept into the old gentleman's little blue eyes and he shook his head several times in solemn if voiceless protest. Forty years ago Angela Wilde, as a girl of twenty, had in the accustomed family phrase "brought lasting disgrace upon them," and she had dwelt, as it were, in the shadow of the pillory ever since. Unmarried she had yielded herself to a lover, and afterward when the full scandal had burst upon her head, though she had not then reached the fulfilment of a singularly charming beauty, she had condemned herself to the life of a solitary prisoner within four walls. She had never since the day of her awakening mentioned the name of her faithless or unfortunate lover, but her silent magnanimity had become the expression of a reproach too deep for words, and her bitter scorn of men had so grown upon her in her cloistral existence that there were hours together when she could not endure even the inoffensive Percival. Cold, white, and spectral as one of the long slim candles on an altar, still beautiful with an indignant and wounded loveliness, she had become in the end at once the shame and the romance of her family.

"There is no reason under the sun why Aunt Angela shouldn't come down to dinner with us to-night," persisted Laura. "Don't you see that by encouraging her as you did in her foolish attitude, you have given her past power over her for life and death. It is wrong—it is ignoble to bow down and worship anything—man, woman, child, or event, as she bows down and worships her trouble."

The flute shook on Uncle Percival's knees. "Ah, Laura, would you have her face the world again?" he asked.

"The world? Nonsense! The world doesn't know there's such a person in it. She was forgotten forty years ago, only she has grown so selfish in her grief that she can never believe it.

The old man sighed and shook his head. "The women of this generation have had the dew brushed off them," he lamented, "but your mother understood. She felt for Angela."

"And yet it was an old story when my mother came here."

"Some things never grow old, my dear, and shame is one of them."

Laura dismissed the assertion with a shrug of scornful protest, and turned the conversation at once into another channel. "Am I anything like my mother, Uncle Percival?" she asked abruptly.

For a moment the old man pondered the question in silence, his little red hands fingering the mouth of his flute.

"You have the Creole hair and the Creole voice," he replied; "but for the rest you are your father's child, every inch of you."

"My mother was beautiful, I suppose?"

"Your father thought so, but as for me she was too little and passionate. I can see her now when she would fly into one of her spasms because somebody had crossed her or been impolite without knowing it."

"They got on badly then—I mean afterward."

"What could you expect, my dear? It was just after the War, and, though she loved your father, she

never in her heart of hearts forgave him his blue uniform. There was no reason in her—she was all one fluttering impulse, and to live peaceably in this world one must have at least a grain of leaven in the lump of one's emotion." He chuckled as he ended and fixed his mild gaze upon the lamp. Being very old, he had come to realise that of the two masks possible to the world's stage, the comic, even if the less spectacular, is also the less commonplace.

"So she died of an overdose of medicine," said Laura; "I have never been told and yet I have always known that she died by her own hand. Something in my blood has taught me."

Uncle Percival shook his head. "No—no, she only made a change," he corrected. "She was a little white moth who drifted to another sphere—because she had wanted so much, my child, that this earth would have been bankrupt had it attempted to satisfy her."

"She wanted what?" demanded Laura, her eyes glowing.

The old man turned upon her a glance in which she saw the wistful curiosity which belongs to age. "At the moment you remind me of her," he returned, "and yet you seem so strong where she was only weak."

"What did she want? What did she want?" persisted Laura.

"Well, first of all she wanted your father—every minute of him, every thought, every heart-beat. He couldn't give it to her, my dear. No man could. I tell you I have lived to a great age, and I have known great people, and I have never seen the man yet who could give a woman all the love she wanted.

Women seem to be born with a kind of divination—a second sight where love is concerned—they aren't content with the mere husk, and yet that is all that the most of them ever get——"

"But my father?" protested Laura; "he broke his heart for her."

A smile at the fine ironic humour of existence crossed the old man's sunken lips. "He gave to her dead what she had never had from him living," he returned. "When she was gone everything—even the man's life for which he had sacrificed her—turned worthless. He always had the seeds of consumption, I suppose, and his gnawing remorse caused them to develop."

A short silence followed his words, while Laura stared at him with eyes which seemed to weigh gravely the meaning of his words. Then, rising hurriedly, she made a gesture as if throwing the subject from her and walked rapidly to the door.

"Aunt Rosa and Aunt Sophy are coming to dine," she said, "so I must glance at the table. I can't remember now whether I ordered the oysters or not."

The old man glanced after her with timid disappointment. "So you haven't time to hear me play?" he asked wistfully.

"Not now—there's Aunt Angela's dinner to be seen to. If Mr. Bleeker comes with Aunt Sophy you can play to him. He likes it."

"But he always goes to sleep, Laura. He doesn't listen—and besides he snores so that I can't enjoy my own music."

"That's because he'd rather snore than do any-

thing else. I wouldn't let that worry me an instant. He goes to sleep at the opera."

She went out, and after giving a few careful instructions to a servant in the dining-room, ascended the staircase to the large square room in the left wing where Angela remained a wilful prisoner. As she opened the door she entered into a mist of dim candle light, by which her aunt was pacing restlessly up and down the length of the apartment.

To pass from the breathless energy of modern New York into this quiet conventual atmosphere was like crossing by a single step the division between two opposing civilisations. Even the gas light, which Angela could not endure, was banished from her eyes, and she lived always in a faint, softened twilight not unlike that of some meditative Old-World cloisters. The small iron bed, the colourless religious prints, the pale drab walls and the floor covered only by a chill white matting, all emphasised the singular impression of an expiation that had become as pitiless as an obsession of insanity. On a small table by a couch, which was drawn up before a window overlooking the park, there was a row of little devotional books, all bound neatly in black leather, but beyond this the room was empty of any consolation for mind or body. Only the woman herself, with her accusing face and her carelessly arranged snow-white hair, held and quickened the imagination in spite of her suggestion of bitter brooding and unbalanced reason. Her eyes looking wildly out of her pallid face were still the beautiful, fawn-like eyes of the girl of twenty, and one felt in watching her that the old tragic shock had paralysed in them the terrible expression of that one

moment until they wore forever the indignant and wounded look with which she had met the blow that destroyed her youth.

"Dear," said Laura, entering softly as she might have entered a death chamber. "You will see Aunt Rosa and Aunt Sophy, will you not?"

Angela did not stop in her nervous walk, but when she reached the end of the long room she made a quick, feverish gesture, raising her hands to push back her beautiful loosened hair. "I will do anything you wish, Laura, except see their husbands."

"I've ceased to urge that, Aunt Angela, but your own sisters——"

"Oh, I will see them," returned Angela, as if the words—as if any speech, in fact—were wrung from the cold reserve which had frozen her from head to foot.

Laura went up to her and, with the impassioned manner which she had inherited from her Southern mother, enclosed her in a warm and earnest embrace. "My dear, my dear," she said, "Uncle Percival tells me that this is one of your bad days. He says, poor man, that he went out and got you flowers."

Angela yielded slowly, still without melting from her icy remoteness. "They were tuberoses," she responded, in a voice which was in itself effectual comment.

"Tuberoses!" exclaimed Laura aghast, "when you can't even stand the scent of lilies. No wonder, poor dear, that your head aches."

"Mary put them outside on the window sill," said Angela, in a kind of resigned despair, "but their

awful perfume seemed to penetrate the glass, so she took them down into the coal cellar."

"And a very good place for them, too," was Laura's feeling rejoinder; "but you mustn't blame him," she charitably concluded, "for he couldn't have chosen any other flower if he had had the whole Garden of Eden to select from. It isn't really his fault after all —it's a part of fatality like his flute."

"He played for me until my head almost split," remarked Angela wearily, "and then he apologised for stopping because his breath was short."

A startled tremor shook through her as a step was heard on the staircase. "Who is it, Laura?"

Laura went quickly to the door and, after pausing a moment outside, returned with a short, flushed, and richly gowned little woman who was known to the world as Mrs. Robert Bleeker.

More than twenty years ago, as the youngest of the pretty Wilde sisters, she had, in the romantic fervour of her youth and in spite of the opposition of her parents, made a love match with a handsome, impecunious young dabbler in "stocks." "Sophy is a creature of sentiment," her friends had urged in extenuation of a marriage which was not then considered in a brilliant light, but to the surprise of everybody, after the single venture by which she had proved the mettle of her dreams, she had sunk back into a prosperous and comfortable mediocrity. She had made her flight—like the queen bee she had soared once into the farthest, bluest reaches of her heaven, and henceforth she was quite content to relapse into the utter commonplaces of the hive. Her yellow hair grew sparse and flat and streaked with gray, her pink-

rose face became over plump and mottled across the nose, and her mind turned soon as flat and unelastic as her body; but she was perfectly satisfied with the portion she had had from life, for, having weighed all things, she had come to regard the conventions as of most enduring worth.

Now she rustled in with an emphatic announcement of stiff brocade, and enveloped the spectral Angela in an embrace of comfortable arms and bosom. Her unwieldy figure reminded Laura of a broad, low wall that has been freshly papered in a large flowered pattern. On her hands and bosom a number of fine emeralds flashed, for events had shown in the end that the impecunious young lover was not fated to dabble in stocks in vain.

"Oh Angela, my poor dear, how are you?" she enquired.

Angela released herself with a shrinking gesture and, turning away, sat down at the foot of the long couch. "I am the same—always the same," she answered in her cold, reserved voice.

"You took your fresh air to-day, I hope?"

"I went down in the yard as usual. Laura," she looked desperately around, "is that Rosa who has just come in?" As she paused a knock came at the door, and Laura opened it to admit Mrs. Payne—the eldest, the richest and the most eccentric of the sisters.

From a long and varied association with men and manners Mrs. Payne had gathered a certain halo of experience, as of one who had ripened from mere acquaintance into a degree of positive intimacy with the world. She had seen it up and down from all sides, had turned it critically about for her

half-humorous, half-sentimental inspection, and the frank cynicism which now flavoured her candid criticism of life only added the spice of personality to her original distinction of adventure. As the wife of an Ambassador to France in the time of the gay Eugénie, and again as one of the diplomatic circle in Cairo and in Constantinople, she had stored her mind with precious anecdotes much as a squirrel stores a hollow in his tree with nuts. Life had taught her that the one infallible method for impressing your generation is to impress it by a difference, and, beginning as a variation from type, she had ended by commanding attention as a preserved specimen of an extinct species. Long, wiry, animated, and habitually perturbed, she moved in a continual flutter of speech—a creature to be reckoned with from the little, flat, round curls upon her temples, which looked as if each separate hair was held in place by a particular wire, to the sweep of her black velvet train, which surged at an exaggerated length behind her feet. Her face was like an old and tattered comic mask which, though it has been flung aside as no longer provocative of pleasant mirth, still carries upon its cheeks and eyebrows the smears of the rouge pot and the pencil.

"My dear Angela," she now asked in her excited tones, "have you really been walking about again? I lay awake all night fearing that you had overtaxed your strength yesterday. Mrs. Francis Barnes —you never knew her of course, but she was a distant cousin of Horace's—died quite suddenly, without an instant's warning, after having walked rapidly twice up and down the room. Since then I have

always looked upon movement as a very dangerous thing."

"Well, I could hardly die suddenly under any circumstances," returned Angela, indifferently. "You've been watching by my death-bed for forty years."

"Oh, dear sister," pleaded Mrs. Bleeker, whose heart was as soft as her bosom.

"It does sound as if you thought we really wanted your things," commented Mrs. Payne, opening and shutting her painted fan. "Of course—if you were to die we should be too heart-broken to care what you left—but, since we are on the subject, I've always meant to ask you to leave me the shawl of old rose-point which belonged to mother."

"Rosa, how can you?" remonstrated Mrs. Bleeker, "I am sure I hope Angela will outlive me many years, but if she doesn't I want everything she has to go to Laura."

"Well, I'm sure I don't see how Laura could very well wear a rose-point shawl," persisted Mrs. Payne. "I wouldn't have started the subject for anything on earth, Angela, but, since you've spoken of it, I only mention what is in my mind. And now don't say a word, Sophy, for we'll go back to other matters. In poor Angela's mental state any little excitement may bring on a relapse."

"A relapse of what?" bluntly enquired honest Mrs. Bleeker.

Mrs. Payne turned upon her a glance of indignant calm.

"Why a relapse of—of her trouble," she responded. "You show a strange lack of consideration for her condition, but for my part I am perfectly

assured that it needs only some violent shock, such as may result from a severe fall or the unexpected sight of a man, to produce a serious crisis."

Mrs. Bleeker shook her head with the stubborn common sense which was the reactionary result of her romantic escapade.

"A fall might hurt anybody," she rejoined, "but I'm sure I don't see why the mere sight of a man should. I've looked at one every day for thirty years and fattened on it, too."

"That," replied Mrs. Payne, who still delighted to prick at the old scandal with a delicate dissecting knife, "is because you have only encountered the sex in domestic shackles. As for me, I haven't the least doubt in the world that the sudden shock of beholding a man after forty years would be her death blow."

"But she has seen Percival," insisted Mrs. Bleeker; and feeling that her illustration did not wholly prove her point added, weakly, "at least he wears breeches."

"I would not see him if I could help myself," broke in Angela, with sudden energy. "I never—never—never wish to see a man again in this world or the next."

Mrs. Payne glanced sternly at Mrs. Bleeker and followed it with an emphatic head shake, which said as plainly as words, "So there's your argument."

"All the same, I don't believe Robert would shock her," remarked Mrs. Bleeker.

"Never—never—never," repeated Angela in a frozen agony, and, rising, she walked restlessly up and down again until a servant appeared to inform the visiting sisters that dinner and Miss Wilde awaited them below.

CHAPTER III

Apologises For An Old-Fashioned Atmosphere

As soon as dinner was over Uncle Percival retired with Mr. Bleeker into the library, from which retreat there issued immediately the shrill piping of the flute. Mr. Bleeker, with an untouched glass of sherry at his elbow and an unlighted cigar in his hand, sank back into the placid after-dinner reverie which is found in the rare cases when old age has encountered a faultless digestion. The happiest part of his life was spent in the pleasant state between waking and sleeping, while as yet the flavour of his favourite dishes still lingered in his mouth—just as the most blissful moments known to Uncle Percival were those in which he piped his cherished airs upon his antiquated instrument. The eldest member of the Wilde family was very old indeed—had in fact successfully rounded some years ago the critical point of his eightieth birthday, and there was the zest of a second childhood in the animation with which he had revived the single accomplishment of his early youth. That youth was now more vivid to his requickened memory than the present was to his enfeebled faculties. The past had become a veritable obsession in his mind, and when he fingered the old flute strength came back to his half-palsied hands and breath returned to his shrunken little body. His own music

was the one sound he heard in all its distinctness, and he hung upon it with an enjoyment which was almost doting in its childish delight.

So the fluting went on merrily, while Mrs. Payne and Mrs. Bleeker, after fidgeting a moment in the drawing-room, decided that they would return for a word or two with Angela. "It is really the only place in the house where one can escape Percival's music," declared Mrs. Payne, who frankly confessed that she had reached the time of life when to bore her was the chief offence society could commit, "so, besides the comfort I afford dear Angela, it is much the pleasantest place for me to pass the evening. I've always been a merciful woman my child," she pursued shaking her little flat, false gray curls above her painted wrinkles, "for never in my life have I cast a stone at anyone who amused me; but as for Percival and his flute! Well, I won't say a disagreeable word on the subject, but I honestly think that a passion at his age is absolutely indecent."

She was so grotesquely gorgeous with her winking diamonds and her old point lace, which yawned over her lean neck, that the distinction she had always aimed at seemed achieved at last by an ironic exaggeration.

"At least it is a perfectly harmless passion," suggested her husband, a beautiful old man of seventy gracious years.

"Harmless!" gasped Mrs. Payne. "Why, it has wrecked the nerves of the entire family, has given me Saint Vitus' dance, has kept Laura awake for nights, has reduced Angela to hysterics, and you actually have the face to tell me it is harmless! Judged

by its effects, I consider it quite as reprehensible as a taste for cards or a fancy for a chorus girl. Those are vices at least that belong to our century and to civilisation, but a flute is nothing less than a relic of barbarism."

"Well, it's worse on me than on anyone else," said Laura, with the dominant spirit which caused Mr. Payne to shiver whenever she tilted against his wife. "My room is just above, and I get the benefit of every note."

The tune issuing from the library had changed suddenly into "The Land o' the Leal," and by the lamp light Uncle Percival could be seen, warm and red and breathless but still blissfully fluting to the sleeping Mr. Bleeker, whose face, fallen back against the velvet cushions, wore a broad, beatific smile.

"He gets his happiness from it at least," persisted Laura. "I suppose it's a part of his life just as poetry is a part of mine, and to be happy at eighty-two one is obliged to be happy in an antedated fashion."

Then, as the two aunts swept from the room to join Angela, Laura seated herself at Mr. Payne's side and caught the hand which he outstretched. Of all the family he had been her favourite since childhood, and she sometimes told herself that he was the only one who knew her as she really was—who had ever penetrated behind her vivid outside armour of personality. He was a man of great unsatisfied tenderness, who indulged a secret charity as another man might have indulged a vicious taste. All his inclinations strained after goodness, and had he possessed the courage to follow the natural bent of his nature toward perfection he might have found his happiness in

the peaceful paths of exalted virtue. But the constant dropping of cynicism will extinguish an angel, and, instead of becoming a shining light to his generation, he had dwindled into a glow-worm beneath the billows of his wife's velvet gown.

Now, as Laura held his hand, she bent upon him one of her long, meditative looks. "Uncle Horace, of all this queer family is Aunt Rosa the queerest or am I?"

Mr. Payne shook his silvered head. "I don't think you're a match for Rosa yet, my dear," he answered with his gentle humour. "Wait till you've turned seventy—then we'll see."

"But I'm not like other women. I don't think their ways. I don't even want the things they want."

The old man's smile shone out as he patted her hand. "That means, I suppose, that you don't want to be married. Who is it this time? Ah, my child, you are born to be adored or to be hated."

Without replying to his question, Laura lifted her full, dark eyes to his face. As he met the intellectual power of her glance, he told himself that he understood the mysterious active principle of her personality—how the many were repelled while the few returned to worship. One felt her, was repulsed or possessed by her, even in her muteness.

"I don't see how any one who has ever dreamed dreams," she said at last, "could fall in love and marry—it is so different—so different."

"So you have refused Mr. Wilberforce? Well, well, he has reached the age when a poor lover may make an excellent friend—and besides, to become Rosa's mouthpiece for a moment, he is very rich."

"And old enough to be my father—but it isn't that. Age has nothing to do with it, nor has congeniality—it is nothing in real life that comes between, for I am fond of him and I don't mind his white hairs in the least, but I can't give up my visions—my ideal hopes."

"Ah, Laura, Laura," sighed the old man, "the trouble is that you don't live on the earth at all, but in a little hanging garden of the imagination."

"And yet I want life," she said.

"We all want it, my child, until we've had it. At your age I wanted it, too, for I had my dreams, though I was not a poet. But there are precious few of us who are willing in youth to accept the world on its own terms—we want to add our little poem to the universal prose of things."

"But it is life itself that I want," repeated Laura.

"And so I wanted Rosa, my dear, every bit as much."

"Rosa!" There was a glow of surprise in the look she turned upon him.

"You find it hard to believe, but it is true nevertheless. I had my golden dream like everyone else, and when Rosa loved me I told myself it had all come true. Well, perhaps, in a measure it has, only, after all, Rosa turned out to be more suited to real life than to poetic moonshine."

"I can't imagine even you idealizing Aunt Rosa," said Laura, "but that I suppose is the way life equalises things."

"That way or another, and the worst it can do for us is to return us our own dreams in grotesque and mutilated forms. That will most likely be your por-

tion, too, my child, for life has hurt every poet since the world began, and it will hurt you more than most because you are so big a creature."

Laura stirred suddenly and, after gazing a moment at the fire, turned upon him a face which had grown brilliant with animation. "I want to taste everything," she said. "I want to turn every page one after one."

"And yet you live the life of a hermit thrush—you have in reality as little part in that bustling turmoil of New York out there as has poor Angela herself."

"But my adventures will come to me—I feel that they will come."

"Then you're happy, my dear, for you have the best of your adventures as you call them in your waiting time."

She leaned toward him, resting her cheek on his gentle old hand, and they sat in silence until Mrs. Payne swept down upon them in her sable wraps and demanded the attendance of her husband.

The hall door closed upon the sisters before Laura had quite come back from her abstraction, which she did at last with a sigh of relief at finding herself alone. Then, leaving Uncle Percival nodding in the library, she went upstairs to the cosy little study which opened from her bedroom on the floor above. The wood fire on the brass andirons was unlighted, and striking a match she held it to the little pile of splinters underneath the logs, watching, with a sensation of pleasure, the small yellow flames lick the crumpled paper and curl upward. Rising after a moment, she stood breathing in the soft twilight-

coloured atmosphere she loved. The place was her own and she kept it carefully guarded from a too garish daylight, while the beloved familiar objects —the shining rows of books, the dull greenish hangings, the costly cushioned easy-chairs, the few rare photographs, the spacious writing table and the single Venetian vase of flowers—were always steeped in a softly shadowed half-tone of light.

As she looked about her the comfort of the room entered into her like warmth, and, opening her arms in a happy gesture, she threw herself among the pillows of the couch and lay watching the rapid yellow flames. Even in the midst of her musing she laughed suddenly to find that she was thinking of the phrase with which Funsten had dismissed the name of Arnold Kemper: 'The only favourable thing one can say of him is to say nothing." Was it really so bad as that she wondered, with a dim memory that somewhere, back in an obscure corner of her bookshelves, lay his first thin, promising volume published now almost fifteen years ago. Rising presently, she began a hasty search among a collection of little novels which had been banished ignominiously from the light of day, and, coming at last upon the story, she brought it to the lamp and commenced a reading prompted solely by the moment's impetuous curiosity. Utterly devoid as it was of literary finish or discerning craftsmanship, the book gripped from the start by sheer audacity—by its dominant, insistent, almost brutal and entirely misdirected power. It was less the story that struck one than the personal equation between the lines, and the impression she brought away from her breathless skimming was that she had

encountered the shock of a tremendous masculine force.

Her head fell back upon the cushions, and she lost herself in the vague wonder the book aroused. Life was there—the life of the flesh, of vivid sensation, of experience that ran hot and swift. The active principle, so strong in the predestined artist, stirred suddenly in her breast, and she felt the instant of blind terror which comes with the realisation of the fleeting possibilities of earth. Outside—beyond her—existence in its multitudinous forms, its diversity of colour, swept on like some vast caravan from which she had been detached and set apart. Lying there she heard the call of it, that tremendous music which shook through her and loosened a caged voice within herself. Her own poetry became for her but a little part of the tumultuous, passionate instinct for life within her—for life not as it was in its reality but as she saw it transfigured and enkindled by the imagination that lives in dreams.

Suddenly from the darkened silence of the house below a thin sound rose trembling, and then, gaining strength, penetrated into the closed chambers. Uncle Percival was at his flute again; he had arisen in the night to resume his impassioned piping; and, rising hurriedly, Laura lit her candle and went out into the hall, where a streak of light beneath Angela's door ran like a white thread across the blackness. Listening a moment, she heard inside the nervous pacing to and fro of tired yet restless feet, and after a short hesitation she turned the knob and entered.

"Oh, Aunt Angela, did the flute wake you?" she asked.

For answer the long white figure stopped its frantic movement and turned upon her a blanched and stricken face out of which two beautiful haunted eyes stared like living terrors—terrors of memory, of silence, of the unseen which had taken visible forms.

"Stop it! Stop it! Stop it!" cried Angela breathlessly, raising her quivering hands to her ears. "I have heard it before! I have heard it—long before!"

She paused, gasping, and without a word Laura turned and ran down the dark staircase, while with each step the air that Uncle Percival played sounded louder in her ears.

The door of the library was open, and as she entered she called out in a voice that held a sob of anger, "Uncle Percival, how could you?"

His attentive, deafened ears were for his music alone, and, letting the flute fall from his hands, he turned to look at her with the pathetic, innocent enquiry of a good but uncomprehending child. At the sight of his smiling, wrinkled face, his gentle blue eyes and the wistful droop of disappointment at the corners of his mouth, her indignation changed suddenly to pity. It seemed to her that she saw all his eighty years looking at her from that furrowed face out of those little wandering round blue eyes—saw the human part of him as she had never seen it before—with its patience of unfulfilment, its scant small pleasures, its innocent senile passion at the end; saw, too, the divine part, hidden in him as in all humanity—that communion of longing which bound his passionate fluting, Angela's passionate remorse and her

own passionate purity into the universal congregation of unsatisfied souls.

The sharp words died upon her lips and, kneeling at his side, she took his shrivelled little hands into her warm, comforting clasp. "Dear Uncle Percival, I understand, and I love you," she said.

CHAPTER IV

Ushers In The Modern Spirit

"So you have seen her," Adams had remarked the same afternoon, as he walked with Trent in the direction of Broadway. "Do you walk up, by the way? I always manage to get in a bit of exercise at this hour."

As Trent fell in with his companion's rapid step, he seemed to be moving in a fine golden glow of enthusiasm. A light icy drizzle had turned the snow upon the pavement into sloppy puddles of water, but to the young man, fresh from his inexperience, the hour and the scene alike were of exhilarating promise.

"I feel as if I had been breathing different air!" he exclaimed, without replying directly to the question. "And yet how simple she is—how utterly unlike the resplendent Mrs. Bridewell——"

He stopped breathlessly, overcome by his excitement, and Adams took up the unfinished sentence almost tenderly. "So far, of course, she is merely a beautiful promise, a flower in the bud," he said. "Her genius—if she has genius—has not found itself, and the notes she strikes are all mere groping attempts at a perfect self-expression. Yet, undoubtedly, she has done a few fine things," he admitted with professional caution.

"But if, as you say, her emotional self does not go into her poems, what becomes of it?" enquired Trent, with a curiosity too impersonal to be vulgar. "For she, finely tempered as she is, suggests nothing so much as a beautiful golden flame."

Adams started, and flashed upon the other a glance as incisive as a search-light.

"Then you, too, recognise her beauty?" he asked in a tone which had a kindly jealousy.

"Am I a fool?" protested Trent, laughing.

"You heard Kemper?"

"I heard him proclaim himself an ass. Well, let him, let him. Would you hand out one of your precious first editions to the crowd?"

"You're right, you're right," assented Adams, and followed his remark with a sudden change of subject. "I am interested, Mr. Trent, in what you yourself have come to do."

"I—Oh, I have done nothing," declared Trent.

"In your aims, then, let us say, I understand that you intend to try the drama?"

"Well, I confess to having done a play that I think isn't bad," replied Trent, blushing over all his fresh, smooth-shaven face. "Benson has promised me a hearing."

"Ah, I know him—he's always eager for new blood. Perhaps you wouldn't mind my speaking a word or two to him?

"Mind!" exclaimed the younger man, his voice shaking. "Why, I can't tell you how happy it would make me."

They had reached Eighteenth Street, and Trent paused a moment on the corner before turning off

to the big red-brick apartment house where he was temporarily placed. "I'd like to walk up to Thirty-fifth with you," he added, "but my mother is expecting me and it makes her nervous when I stay out after dark. She's just from the country, you know, and she gets confused by the noise." He hesitated an instant and then finished with embarrassment. "I wish so much that she could know you."

"It is a pleasure I hope for very shortly," responded Adams. "How does she like New York, by the way?"

Under the electric light Trent's eyes seemed to run entirely to sparkles. "Ah, well, it's rather lonely for her. She misses the callers at home who used to come to spend the day."

"We must try to change that," said the other as he moved off, while Trent noted that despite his genial sympathy of manner there had been no mention of Mrs. Adams. Where was she? and what was she? questioned the younger man in perplexity, as he crossed to his apartment house at the corner of Fourth Avenue.

At Twenty-third Street Adams had turned almost unconsciously into Fifth Avenue, for so detached was the intellectual remoteness in which he lived that he might have been, for all his immediate perceptions of his surroundings, strolling at dusk along a deserted Western road. He was so used to dwelling on the cool heights of a dearly bought, a hardly wrung, philosophy that he had become at last almost oblivious of the mere external details of life. To live at all had been for him a matter of fine moral courage, and his slight, delicate, emaciated, yet daunt-

less, figure was in itself the expression of a resolute will to endure as well as to resist. When a man has faced death at close range for fifteen years he is, in a measure, bound to become either indifferent satyr or partial saint, and even in the extremity of his first revolt his personal ideal had stood, like the angel with the flaming sword, between Adams and the quagmire of bodily materialism. He was not, perhaps, as yet even so much as a deficient stoic, but he had wrung from suffering a certain high loyalty to human fellowship and a half humorous, if wholly gallant, determination to keep fast at any cost until the very end. Why he had made the fight he did not ask himself, nor could he have answered. His ambition, his marriage, even the ordinary sensuous enjoyments of life, had crumbled as the mythical Dead Sea apples upon his lips, yet the failure of his own mere individual pursuit of happiness had in no-wise soured the sweet and finely flavored optimism of his nature.

The fragrance from the violets worn by a passing woman struck him presently, and he looked outside of himself almost with a start. Around him many women were walking briskly under raised umbrellas, and some showed pretty faces freshened like flowers by the icy rain. He himself had forgotten the rain, had forgotten even the cold which pierced his chest, and, suddenly remembering the directions of his physician, he fastened his overcoat more closely and hastened across the street, passing rapidly in and out among the moving vehicles until he gained, over the sloppy crossing, the safety of the opposite sidewalk. Here he turned in the direction of Madison Avenue

and finally, drawing out his latchkey, entered one of the dingy, flat-faced, utterly conventional brown houses which make up so large a part of the characterless complexion of New York life.

The interior was brilliantly lighted, and he was shrinking noiselessly into his study at the back when he heard his name called from the drawing-room threshold and saw his wife standing there while she put on a long white evening cloak over a filmy effect of cream-coloured lace. She was a small, pretty woman, with a cloud of fluffy, artificially blonde hair and large, innocent, absolutely blank blue eyes. A year ago she had resembled, if one might imagine the existence of such a being, a perfectly worldly wise and cynically minded baby, but twelve months of late suppers and many plays had already blighted her rose-leaf skin and sown three fine, nervous little wrinkles between her delicately arched eyebrows. She was very vivacious, but, as Gerty Bridewell had observed, it was a vivacity that was hardly justified, since, possessing neither the means nor the manner exacted by the more exclusive circles, she had been compelled to compromise with a social body which made up in members what it lacked as an organism. Her dash and her prettiness sufficed to place her comfortably here, but beyond a speaking acquaintance with Gerty, who confessed that she was too charitable to be exclusive, she had not as yet approached that small shining sphere whose inmates boast the larger freedom no less than the finer discrimination. The larger freedom, it seemed at times, was all of it that she was ever to attain, for, venturing a little too boldly once or twice with a light head, she

had at last found herself skating gingerly over a veritable sleet of scandal. She got herself rumoured about so persistently that from being merely improbable, she had become, in Gerty's words again, "one of the very last of the impossibilities." And of late Adams' friends had begun to ask themselves quite seriously, "why in the deuce he didn't keep a hand upon his wife." How much he knew or how much there was, in reality, to know had become in a limited circle almost the question of the hour, until Perry Bridewell had demanded in final exasperation "whether Adams was ridiculously ignorant or outrageously indifferent?"

But if the curious had been permitted to observe the object of their uncertainty as he stood under the full glare before his festive wife they would have found neither ignorance nor indifference in his manner. He regarded her with a frank, fatherly tolerance, in which there was hardly a suggestion of a more passionate concern.

"Wrap up well," he said, as his glance shot over her, "there's a biting wind outside."

Connie screwed up her delicate eyebrows and the fine little wrinkles leaped instantly into view. There was a nervous irritation in her look, which recoiled from her husband as from a blank and shining wall.

"I'm dining at Sherry's with the Donaldsons," she explained. "I knew you wouldn't come, so I didn't even trouble you to decline."

"You're right, my dear," he rejoined gayly.

"Mr. Brady has called for me," she went on with the faintest possible hesitation in her voice, "and as we're all going to the theatre afterward I shall

probably be late. Don't bother about sitting up for me—I have a key."

"Well, take care of yourself," responded Adams pleasantly, adding to a young man who appeared in the drawing-room doorway, "How are you, Mr. Brady? Please don't let Mrs. Adams be so foolish as to stand outside in the wind. I can't make her take care of her cold."

"Oh, I'll promise to look out for it," replied Brady, standing slightly behind Connie, and arranging by a careless movement the white fur on her cloak. His handsome wooden features possessed hardly more character than was expressed by his immaculately starched shirt front, but he was not without a certain wholly superficial attraction, half as of a sleek, well-groomed animal and half as of a masculine conceit, naked and unashamed.

Connie tinkled out her nervous, high-pitched, vacant little laugh, which she used to fill in gaps in conversation much as a distinguished virtuoso might interlude his own important efforts with selections of light vocal strains.

"Roger is always worrying about my health," she said, "but the truth is that it's so good I'll never begin to value it until it's gone." Her excited, fluttering manner blew about her almost with a commotion of the atmosphere, and reminded Adams at times of a tempestuous March breeze shaking a fragile wind flower. It was unnatural, overdone, unbecoming, but it seemed at last to have got quite beyond her control, and the pretty girlish composure he remembered as one of her freshest charms, was lost in her general violence of animation. Of late he knew that

she had fought off her natural exhaustion by the frequent use of stimulants, and it seemed to him that he saw their immediate effects in her flushed cheeks and too brightly shining eyes.

"Don't stay out late," he urged again; "you've been rushing like mad these last weeks and you need rest."

"But I never rest," rejoined Connie, still laughing, "and I honestly hope that I shan't come to a stop until I die."

She fastened her cloak under the fall of lace, and, when Brady had slipped into his overcoat, Adams turned back to open the hall door, which let in a biting draught.

"Ta-ta! don't sit up!" cried Connie breathlessly, as, more than ever like a filmy wind flower in a high wind, she was blown down the steps, across the slushy sidewalk, and into the hired carriage.

When they had gone Adams went into the dining-room and dined alone without dressing, as he had done almost every evening for the last few months. The Irish maid waited upon him with a solicitude in which he read his pose of a deserted husband, and he tried with a forcible, though silent, bravado to dispel her very evident assumption. Connie had certainly not deserted him against his will, and when her absence had begun to show as so incontestable a relief it seemed the basest ingratitude to force upon her reckless shoulders the odium of an entirely satisfying arrangement. After a day of mental and physical exertion the further effort of a conversation with her was something that he felt to be utterly beyond him, and the distant Colorado days when she had played

the part of a soft, inviting kitten and he had responded happily to the appeal for constant petting, now lay very far behind them both—buried somewhere in that cloudless country they had left. Neither of them wanted the petting back again, and as he rose from his simple dinner and entered his study at the end of the hall he heaved a sigh of conscious thankfulness that it was empty.

While he lighted his pipe his eyes turned instinctively to his precious first editions of which Trent had spoken, and then straight as an arrow to a photograph of Laura which stood with several others upon his writing table. The eyes of most men would have lingered, perhaps, on one of Connie, which was taken, indeed, at her best period and in a remarkably effective pose, but Adams' glance brushed it with an indifference only unkind in its mute sincerity, while he sought the troubled gaze of Laura, who wore in the picture a shy and startled look, like that of a wild thing suddenly trapped in its reserve. He had never, even in his own mind, analysed his feeling for the woman whom he was content to call his friend—he hesitated to condemn himself almost because he feared to question—but whenever he entered alone his empty room he knew that he turned instinctively to draw strength and courage from her pictured face. It was a face that had followed after the ideal beauty, and in her spiritual isolation, as of one devoted to an inner vision, he had always found the peculiar pathetic quality of her charm. Into her verse, chastened and restrained by the sense for perfection which dwelt in her art, she had put, he knew, this same cloistral vision of an unrealised world—a

vision which had expanded and blossomed in the luxuriant if slightly formal garden of her intellect. The world she looked upon was a world, as Adams had once said, "seen through the haze of a golden temperament"—the dream of an imaginative mysticism, of a conventual purity, a dream which is to the reality as the soul of a man is to the body. And it was this inspired divination, this luminous idealism, which had caused Adams to exclaim when he put down her first small gray volume: "Is it possible that we can still see visions?"

A little later, when he came to know her, he found that the vision she looked upon had coloured not only her own soul, but even the outward daily happenings of her life. For him she was from the first compacted of divine mysteries, of exquisite surprises, and he loved to fancy that he could see her genius burning like a clear flame within her and shining at vivid moments with a still soft radiance in her face. He always thought of her soul as of something luminous, and there were instants when it seemed to touch her eyes and her mouth with an edge of light. Beyond this her complexities remained for him as on the day when he first saw her—if she was obscure it was the obscurity of a star seen through a fog—and the desire to understand lost itself presently in the bewilderment of his misapprehension. At last, however, he had put her, as it were, tentatively aside, had relinquished his attempt to reduce her to a formula with the despairing admission that she was, take her as you would, a subtlety that compelled one to a mental effort. The effort which he had up to this time associated with the society of women had been of

anything but a mental character. There was the effort of putting one's best physical foot in advance, the effort of keeping one's person conspicuously in evidence and one's intellect as unobtrusively in abeyance —the material effort of appearing always in one's best trousers, the moral effort of presenting always one's worst intelligence. It had seemed to him until he met Laura—and his opinion was the effect of a limited experience upon a large philosophic ignorance —that the female sex played the part in Nature which is performed by the chorus in a Greek tragedy —that it shrilly voiced the horrors of the actual in the face of a divine indifference—and strenuously insisted upon the importance of the eternal detail. From Connie he had gathered that the feminine mind tended naturally toward a material philosophy—toward a deification of the body, a faith in the fugitive allurement of the senses; and because of his earlier initiation he had taken Laura's intellectual radiance as the shining of a virtually disembodied spirit. His own senses had led him, he recognised now, to disastrous issues; his love for Connie had been the prompting of mere physical impulse, and he had emerged from it with a feeling of escaping into freedom. Too much Nature he had learned during those months of mental apathy is in its way quite as destructive as too little—there must be a soul in desire to keep it alive, he understood at last, or the perishing body of it will decay for lack of a vital flame in the very hour of its fulfilment. A colder man might have come to such knowledge along impersonal paths, a coarser one would never have gone beyond it, but in Adams the old fighting spirit—a survival of the un-

compromising Puritan conscience—had brought him up again, soul and body, to struggle afresh for a cleaner and a sharper air. Life had meant more to him in the beginning than a mere series of sensations—more even than any bodily conditions, any material attainment; and it was the final triumph of his austere vision that it should mean most of all when it seemed to a casual glance to contain least of actual value.

CHAPTER V

In Which a Young Man Dreams Dreams

Since coming to New York Mrs. Trent had taken a small apartment in a big apartment house, where she lived with her son a perfectly provincial as well as a strictly secluded life. She was a large, florid, motherly old lady who still wore mourning for a husband who had been killed while fox hunting twenty-five years ago. Her face resembled a friendly and auspicious full moon, and above it her shining hair rolled like a parting of silvery clouds. Day or night she was always engaged in knitting a purple shawl, which appeared never to have been finished since her son's infancy, for his earliest recollection was of the plump, soft balls of brilliant yarn and the long ivory knitting needles, which clicked briskly while she worked with a pleasant, familiar sound. To this day the clicking of those needles brought to his mouth the taste of large slices of bread and jam, and to his ears the soothing murmur of Bible stories told in the twilight.

She was always, too, serene gossip that she was, full of a monotonous, rippling stream of words, and if her days in New York were trying to her body and burdened with homesickness for her heart, no one —not even St. George himself—had ever surprised so much as a passing shadow upon her face. The

young man's untiring pursuit of managers and of players had left her continually alone, but she busied herself cheerfully about her housekeeping, and found diversion in yielding to an inordinate curiosity concerning her neighbours. Once or twice she had questioned him about his absence, and this was especially so the morning after his meeting with Laura Wilde.

"You didn't tell me where you were yesterday, St. George," she observed at breakfast; "did you meet any one who is likely to be of use? I remember Beverly Pierce told me that everything had to come through introductions in the North."

He looked at her steadily a moment before replying, taking in all the lovely details of her appearance behind the coffee tray—the morning sunlight on her white hair and on the massive, hand-beaten, old silver service, the solitary rose he had purchased in the street standing between them in a slender Bohemian vase, brought from the rare old china in the press just at her back, the dainty hemstitching on her collar and cuffs of fine thread cambric, and lastly the vivid spot of color made by the knitting she had laid aside.

"I met Laura Wilde," he answered presently, "but as you never read poetry you can't understand just what it means."

As she held the cream jug poised above his coffee cup Mrs. Trent smiled back at him with a placid wonder.

"Who is she, my son? A lady—I mean a *real* one?"

"Oh, yes, sterling."

"But she writes verse you say! Is it improper?"

His eyes shone with amusement. "Improper! Why, what an idea!"

"I'm sure I don't know how it is," responded his mother, carefully measuring with her eye the correct allowance of cream, "but somehow women always seem to get immodest when they take to verse. It's as if they went into it for the express purpose of airing their improprieties."

"I say!" he exclaimed, with gentle mockery, "have you been reading ' Sappho ' at your age?"

She continued to regard him blandly, without so much as a flicker of humour in her serene blue eyes. "Your grandfather used to be very fond of quoting something from 'Sappho,'" she returned thoughtfully, "or was it from Mr. Pope? I can't remember which or what it was, except that it was hardly the kind of thing you would recite to a lady."

Trent laughed good-humouredly as he received his coffee cup.

"Well, you can't point a moral with Miss Wilde," he rejoined; "you'd be at liberty to recite her to anybody who had the sense to understand her."

"Is she very deep?"

"She's profound—she's wonderful—she's a genius."

Mrs. Trent shook her head a little doubtfully. "I don't see that a woman has any business to be a genius," she remarked. "And I can't help being prejudiced against women writers; your father always was. It's as if they really pretended to know as much as a man. When they publish books I suppose they expect men to read them and that in itself is a kind of conceit."

Trent yielded the point as he helped himself to the cakes brought in by an old negro servant.

"Well, I shan't ask Miss Wilde to call on you," he laughed, "so you won't be apt to run across the learned of your sex."

"Oh, I shouldn't mind myself," responded the old lady, with amiability, "but I do hate to have you thrown with women that you wouldn't meet at home."

"I certainly shouldn't meet Miss Wilde at home if that is what you mean."

"It's bad enough to live in a partitioned cage like this," resumed Mrs. Trent, in her soft, expressionless voice, "and to dry your clothes on your neighbour's roofs, but I can bear anything so long as we are not forced to associate with common people. Of course I don't expect to find the manners of Virginia up here," she added as a last concession, "but I may as well confess that the people I've come across don't seem to me to be exactly civil."

"Just as we don't seem to them to be particularly worldly-wise, I dare say."

She nodded her head, almost without hearing him, while her even tones rippled on over her quaint ideas, which shone to her son's mind like little silver pebbles beneath the shallow stream.

"I'm almost reconciled to the fact that old ladies wear colours and flowers in their bonnets," she pursued, "to say nothing of low-neck dresses, but it does seem to me that they might show a little ordinary politeness. I met the doctor coming out of the apartment downstairs, so in common decency I went immediately to enquire who was sick, and carried along a glass

of chicken jelly. The woman who opened the door was rather rude," she finished with a sigh. "I don't believe such a thing had ever happened to her before in the whole course of her life."

Trent gave her a tender glance across the coffee service.

"Probably not," he admitted, "but I wouldn't waste my jelly if I were you."

"I sha'n't" she determined sadly, "and that's the thing I miss most of all—visiting the sick."

"You might devote yourself to the hospitals—there are plenty of them it seems."

Her resignation, however, was complete, and she showed no impulse to reach out actively again. "It wouldn't be the same, my dear—I don't want strange paupers but real friends. Do you know," she added, with a despair that was almost abject, "I was counting up this morning the people I might speak to if I met them in the street, and I got them in easily on the fingers of one hand. That included," she confessed after a hesitation, "the doctor, the butcher's boy and the woman who comes to scrub. It would surprise you to find what a very interesting woman she is."

Trent rose from his chair and, coming round to where she sat, gave her a boyish hug of sympathy. "You're a regular angel of a mother," he said and added playfully, while he still held her, "even then I don't see how you make it five."

She put up her large white hand and smoothed his hair across his forehead. "That's only because I made an acquaintance in the elevator yesterday," she replied.

"In the elevator! How?"

"The thing always makes me nervous, you know—I can't abide it, and I'd much rather any day go up and down the seven flights—but she met me as I started to walk and persuaded me to come inside. Then she held my hand until I got quite to the bottom."

"Indeed," said Trent suspiciously; "who was she?"

"Her name is Christina Coles, and she came from Clarke County. I knew her grandfather."

"Thank Heaven!" breathed Trent, and his voice betrayed his happy reassurance.

"She's really very pretty—all the Coles were handsome—her great-aunt was once a famous beauty. Do you remember my speaking of her—Miss Betty Coles?" He shook his head, and she proceeded with her reminiscence.

"Well, she was said to have received fifty proposals before her twenty-fifth birthday, but she never married. On her last visit to me, when she was a very old lady, I asked her why—and her answer was: 'Pure fastidiousness.'" She had picked up her purple shawl, and the long ivory knitting needles began to click.

"But I'm more interested in the young lady of the elevator—What is she like?"

"Not the beauty that Betty was, but still very pretty, with the same blue eyes and brown hair, which she wears parted exactly as her aunt did fifty years ago. I fear, though," she finished in a whisper, "I really fear—that she writes."

"Is that so? Did she tell you?"

"Not in words, but she carried a parcel exactly like your manuscripts, and she spoke—oh, so seriously—of her work. She spoke of it quite as if it were a baby."

"By Jove!" he gasped, and after a moment, "I hope at any rate that she will be a comfort."

With her knitting still in her hands, she rose and went to the window, where she stood placidly staring at the sunlight upon the blackened chimney-pots. "At least I can talk to her about her aunt," she returned. Then her gaze grew more intense, and she almost flattened her nose against the pane. "I declare I wonder what that woman is doing out there on that fire-escape," she observed.

After he had got into his overcoat Trent came back to give her a parting kiss. "Find out by luncheon time," he returned gaily.

When, presently, he entered the elevator, he found it already occupied by a young lady whom he recognised from his mother's description as Christina Coles. She was very pretty, but, even more than by her prettiness, he was struck by her peculiar steadfastness of look, as of one devoted to a single absorbing purpose. He noticed, too, that the little tan coat she wore was rather shabby, and that there was a small round hole in one of the fingers of her glove. When she spoke, as she did when leaving the key with the man in charge of the elevator, her voice sounded remarkably fresh and pleasant. They left the house together, but while she walked rapidly toward Broadway he contented himself with strolling leisurely along Fourth Avenue, where he bent a vacant gaze on the objects assembled in the windows of dealers in "antiques."

But his thoughts did not so much as brush the treasures at which he stared, and neither the hurrying crowd—which had a restless, workaday look at the morning hour—nor the noisily clanging cars broke into the exquisitely reared castle of his dreams. Since the evening before his imagination had been thrilling to the tune of some spirited music, flowing presumably from these airy towers, and as he went on over the wet sunlight on the sidewalk, he was still keeping step to the exalted if unreal measures. Never in his life; not even in his wildest literary ecstasies, had he felt so assured of the beauty, of the bountifulness, of his coming years—so filled with a swelling thankfulness for the mere physical fact of birth. He was twenty-five, he believed passionately in his own powers, and he was, he told himself with emphasis, in love for the first and only time. In the confused tangle of his fancy he saw Laura like some great white flower, growing out of reach, yet not entirely beyond endeavour, and the ladder that went up to her was made by his own immediate successes. Then the footlights before his play swam in his picture and he heard already the applause of crowded houses and felt in his head the intoxication of his triumph. Act by act, scene by scene, he rehearsed in fancy his great drama, seeing the players throng before the footlights and seeing, too, Laura applauding softly from a stage box at the side. He had had moments of despondency over his idea, had grovelled in abject despair during trying periods of execution, but now all uncertainty—all misgivings evaporated like an obscuring fog before a burst of light. The light, indeed, had at the moment the

full radiance of a great red glow such as he had seen used for effective purposes upon the stage—and just as every object of scenery had taken, for the time, a portion of the transfiguring suffusion—so now the external ugly details among which he moved were bathed in the high coloured light of his imagination.

But if the end is sometimes long in coming, it comes at last even to the visions of youth, and when his tired limbs finally dragged his soaring spirit to earth, he took a passing car and came home to luncheon. The glamour had faded suddenly from his dreams, as if a bat's wing had fluttered overhead, and in his new mood, he felt a resurgence of his old self-consciousness. He was provoked by the suspicion that he had shown less as a coming dramatist than as a present fool, and he contrasted his own awkwardness with Adams' whimsical ease of manner. Did a woman ever forget how a man appeared when she first met him? Would any amount of fame tomorrow obliterate from Laura's memory his embarrassment of yesterday? He had heard that the surface impression was what counted in the feminine mind, and this made him think enviously, for a minute, of Perry Bridewell—of his handsome florid face and his pleasant animal magnetism. Perry was stupid and an egoist, and yet he had heard that Mrs. Bridewell, for all her beauty and her wit, adored him, while he openly neglected her. Was the secret of success, after all, simply an indifference to everyone's needs except one's own? or was it rather the courage to impress the world that one's own were the only needs that counted?

He was late for luncheon but his mother had waited for him, and he found when he entered the drawing room that Christina Coles was with her. The girl still wore her hat, but she had removed her jacket, and it lay with a little brown package on the sofa. As she spoke to him he was struck afresh by the singular concentration of her expression.

"Your mother tells me that you've written a play," she began, a little shyly; "she says, too, that it is wonderful."

"'She says' is well put," he retorted gaily, "but I hear that you, also, are among the prophets."

"I am nothing else," she answered earnestly. "It is everything to me—it is my life."

Her frankness startled him unpleasantly, and but for her girlish prettiness, he might have felt himself almost repelled. As it was he merely glanced appealingly at his mother, who intervened with a gesture of her knitting needle. "She writes stories," explained the old lady, appearing to transfix her subject on the ivory point; "it is just as I imagined."

The girl herself met his eyes almost fiercely, reminding him vaguely of the look with which a lioness might defend her threatened young.

"I've done nothing yet," she declared, "but I mean to—I mean to if it takes every single hour I have to live." Then her manner changed suddenly, and she impressed him as melting from her hard reserve. "Oh, she tells me that you've met Laura Wilde!" she said.

The sacred name struck him, after his impassioned dreaming, like a sharp blow between the eyes, and he

met the girl's animated gesture with a look of blank aversion.

"I've met her—yes," he answered coldly.

But her enthusiasm was at white heat, and he saw what he had thought mere prettiness in her warm to positive beauty. "And you adore her work as I do?" she exclaimed.

After a moment's hesitation his ardour flashed out to meet her own. "Oh, yes, I adore her work and her!" he said.

CHAPTER VI

Shows That Mr. Worldly-Wise-Man May Belong to Either Sex

Several afternoons later Trent was to have further light thrown on the character of Christina Coles by a chance remark of Roger Adams, into whose office he had dropped for a moment as he was on his way to make his first call upon Mrs. Bridewell.

After a few friendly enquiries about the young man's own work, and the report of a promising word from the great Benson, Adams took up a letter lying loose among the papers on his big littered desk.

"Half the tragedy in New York is contained in a letter like this," he observed. "Do you know, by the way, that the mass of outside literary workers drawn in at last by the whirlpool constitutes almost a population? Take this girl, now, she is so consumed by her ambition, for heaven knows what, that she comes here and starves in an attic rather than keep away in comfort. That reminds me," he added, with a sudden recollection, "she's from your part of the country."

"Indeed!" An intuition shot like a conviction into Trent's mind. "Could her name, I wonder, by any chance be Coles?"

"You know her then?"

"I've met her, but do you mean to say that ability is what she hasn't got?"

"For some things I've no doubt she has an amazing amount, only she's mistaken its probable natural bent. She strikes me as a woman who was born for the domestic hearth, or failing that she'd do admirably, I dare say, in a hospital."

"It's the literary instinct, then, that's missing in her?"

"Not the instinct so much as the literary stuff, and in that she's not different from a million others. She is evidently on fire with the impulse to create, but the power—the creative matter—isn't in her. Let her keep up, and she'll probably go on doing 'hack' work until her death."

"But she's so pretty," urged Trent with a chivalric qualm—and he remembered her smooth brown hair parted over her rosy ears, her blue eyes, fresh as flowers, and the peculiar steadfastness that possessed her face.

"The more's the pity," said Adams, while the muscles about his mouth twitched slightly, as they always did when he was deeply moved, "it's a bigger waste. I wrote to her as a father might have done and begged her to give it up," he went on, "and in return," he tapped the open sheet, "she sends me this fierce, pathetic little letter and informs me grandly that her life is dedicated. Dedicated, good Lord!" he exclaimed compassionately, "dedicated to syndicated stories in the Sunday press and an occasional verse in the cheaper magazines."

"And there's absolutely nothing to be done?" asked Trent.

Adams met the question with a frown.

"Oh, if it would make it all come right in the end, I'd go on publishing her empty, trite little articles until Gabriel blows his trumpet."

"It wouldn't help, though, after all."

"Well, hardly—the quick way is sure to be the most merciful," he laughed softly with the quality of kindly humour which never failed him, "we'll starve her out as soon as possible," he declared.

As if to dismiss the subject, he refolded the letter, slipped it in its envelope, and placed it in one of his crammed pigeon-holes. "Thank God, your own case isn't of the hopeless kind!" he exclaimed fervently.

"Somehow success looks like selfishness," returned Trent, showing by his tone the momentary depression which settled so easily upon his variable moods.

At the speech Adams turned upon him the full sympathy of his smile, while he enclosed in a warm grasp the hand which the young man held out.

"It's what we're made for," he responded cheerily, "success in one way or another."

His words, and even more his look, remained with Trent long afterwards, blowing, like a fresh strong wind, through the hours of despondency which followed for him upon any temporary exaltation. The young man had a trick of remembering faces, not as wearing their accustomed daily look, but as he had seen them animated and transfigured by any vivid moment of experience, and he found later that when he thought of Adams it was to recall the instant's kindly lighting of the eyes, the flicker of courageous humour about the mouth and the dauntless ring in

the usually quiet voice. He realised now, as he walked through the humming streets, that success or failure is not an abstract quantity but a relative value—that a man may be a shining success in the world's eyes and a comparative failure in his own. To Trent, Adams had for years represented the cultured and scholarly critic—the writer who, in his limited individual field, had incontestably "arrived." Now, for the first time, he saw that the editor looked upon himself as a man of small achievements, and that, inasmuch as his idea had been vastly more than his execution, he felt himself to belong to the unfulfilled ones of the earth.

When, a little later, he reached Mrs. Bridewell's house in Sixty-ninth Street the servant invited him, after a moment's wait below, into her sitting-room upstairs, and, following the man's lead, he was finally ushered into a charming apartment upon the second floor. A light cloud of cigarette smoke trailed toward him as he entered, and when he paused, confused by broken little peals of laughter, he made out a group of ladies gathered about a tiny Oriental table upon which stood a tray of Turkish coffee. Gerty rose from the circle as he advanced, and moved a single step forward, while the pale green flounces of her train rippled prettily about her feet. Her hair was loosely arranged, and she gave him an odd impression of wearing what in his provincial mind he called a "wrapper"—his homely name for the exquisite garment which flowed, straight and unconfined, from her slender shoulders. His mother, he remembered, not without a saving humour, had always insisted that a lady should ap-

pear before the opposite sex only in the entire armour of her "stays" and close-fitting bodice.

Gerty, as she mentioned the names of her callers, subsided with her ebbing green waves into the chair from which she had risen, and held her cigarette toward Trent with a pretty inviting gesture. Her delicate grace gave the pose a piquant attraction, and he found himself watching with delight the tiny rings of smoke which curled presently from her parted lips. As she smoked she held her chin slightly lifted, and regarded him from beneath lowered lids with an arch and careless humour.

"If you'd been the Pope himself," she remarked, as an indifferent apology, "I'd hardly have done more than fling the table-cover over my head. Even you, after you'd spent a morning trying on a velvet gown, would require a lounge and a good smoke."

He admitted that he thought it probable, and then turned to one of the callers who had spoken—a handsome woman with gray hair, which produced an odd effect of being artificial.

"I wish I'd done nothing worse than try on clothes," she observed, "but I've been to lunch with an old lover."

"Poor dear," murmured Gerty, compassionately, as she passed Trent a cup of coffee, "was he so cruel as to tell you you'd retained your youth?"

"He did worse," sighed the handsome woman, "he assured me I hadn't."

"Well, he couldn't have done more if he'd married you," declared Gerty, with her gleeful cynicism.

"He was too brutally frank for a husband," re

marked a second caller as she sipped her coffee. "You showed more discretion, Susie, than I gave you credit for."

"Oh, you needn't compliment me," protested Susie; "in those days he hadn't a penny."

"Indeed! and now?"

"Now he has a great many, but he has attached to himself a wife, and I a husband. Well, I can't say honestly that I regret him," she laughed, "for if he has lived down his poverty he hasn't his passion for red—he wore a red necktie. Why is it, " she lamented generally to the group, "that the male mind leans inevitably toward violent colours?"

"Perhaps they appeal to the barbaric part of us," suggested Trent, becoming suddenly at ease amid the battle of inanities.

"Have you a weakness for red, too, Mr. Trent?" enquired Gerty.

The sparkle in his eyes leaped out at her challenge.

"Only in the matter of hair," he retorted boldly.

She regarded him intently for a moment, while he felt again as he had felt at Laura Wilde's, not only her fascination—her personal radiance—but the conviction that she carried at heart a deep disgust, a heavy disenchantment, which her ostentatious gayety could not conceal. Even her beauty gave back to him a suggestion of insincerity, and he wondered if the brightness of her hair and of her mouth was as artificial as her brilliant manner. It was magnificent, but, after all, it was not nature.

"Because I warn you now," she pursued, after the brief pause, "that if you bind your first play in red I shall refuse to read it."

"You can't escape on that ground," rejoined Trent, "I'll make it green."

"Well, you're more civilised than Perry," declared Gerty, with one of her relapses into defiant ridicule, which caused Trent to wonder if she were not acting upon an intuition which taught her that a slight shock is pleasantly stimulating to the fancy, "and I suppose it's my association with him that convinces me if we'd leave your sex alone it would finally revert to the savage state and to skin girdles."

"Now don't you think Perry would look rather nice in skins?" enquired the handsome woman. "I can quite see him with his club like the man in—which one of Wagner's?"

"It isn't the club of the savage I object to," coolly protested Gerty, "it's the taste. Perry has been married to me five years," she continued, reflectively, "a long enough period you would think to teach even a Red Indian that my hair positively shrieks at anything remotely resembling pink. Yet when I went to the Hot Springs last autumn he actually had this room hung for me in terra-cotta."

Trent cast a blank stare about the tapestried walls.

"But where is it?" he demanded.

"It's gone," was Gerty's brief rejoinder, and she added, after a moment devoted to her cigarette, "now that's where it pays to have the wisdom of the serpent. I really flatter myself," she admitted complacently, "that I've a genius, I did it so beautifully. Your young innocent would have mangled matters to the point of butchery and have gloried like a martyr in her domestic squabbles, but I've

learned a lesson or two from misfortune, and one of them is that a man invariably prides himself upon possessing the quality he hasn't got. That's a perfectly safe rule," she annotated along the margin of her story. "I used to compliment an artist upon his art and an Apollo upon his beauty—but it never worked. They always looked as if I had undervalued them, so now I industriously praise the folly of the wise and the wisdom of the fool."

"And the decorative talent of Perry," laughed one of the callers.

"You needn't smile," commented Gerty, while Trent watched the little greenish flame dance in her eyes, "it isn't funny—it's philosophy. I made it out of life."

"But what about the terra-cotta?" enquired Susie.

"Oh, as I've said, I did nothing reckless," resumed Gerty, relaxing among her cushions, "I neither slapped his face nor went into hysterics—these tactics, I've found, never work unless one happens to be a prima donna—so I complimented him upon his consideration and sat down and waited. That night he went to a club dinner—after the beautiful surprise he'd given me he felt that he deserved a little freedom—and the door had no sooner closed upon him than I paid the butler to come in and smoke the walls. He didn't want to do it at all, so I really had to pay him very high—I gave him a suit of Perry's evening clothes. It's the ambition of his life, you know, to look like Perry."

"How under heaven did he manage it?" persisted Susie. "The smoke, I mean, not the resemblance."

"There are a good many lamps about the house

and we brought them all in, every one. The butler warned me it was dangerous, but I assured him I was desperate. That settled it—that and the evening clothes—and by the time Perry returned the room was like an extinct volcano."

"And he never found out?" asked Susie, as the callers rose to go.

"Found out! My dear, do you really give him credit for feminine penetration? Well, if you will go—goodbye—and—oh—don't look at my gown to-morrow night or you'll turn blue with envy," then, as Trent started to follow the retreating visitors, she detained him by a gesture. "Stay awhile, unless you're bored," she urged, "but if you're really bored I shan't say a word. I assure you I sometimes bore myself."

As he fell back into his chair Trent was conscious of a feeling of intimacy, and strange as it was, it dispelled instantly his engrossing shyness.

"I'm not bored," he said, "I'm merely puzzled."

"Oh, I know," Gerty nodded, "but you'll get over it. I puzzle everybody at first, but it doesn't last because I'm really as clear as running water. My gayety and my good spirits are but the joys of flippancy, you see."

"I don't see," protested Trent, his eyes warming.

She laughed softly, as if rather pleased than otherwise by the frankness of his admiration. "You haven't lost as yet the divine faith of youth," she said, carelessly flicking the ashes of her cigarette upon the little table at her elbow. Then, tossing the burned end into a silver tray, she pushed it from her with a decisive movement. "I've had six," she observed, "and that's my limit."

"What I'm trying to understand," confessed Trent, leaning forward in his earnestness, "is why you should care so greatly for Miss Wilde?"

Gerty flashed up suddenly from her cushions. "And pray why shouldn't I?" she demanded.

"Because," he hesitated an instant and then advanced with the audacity born of ignorance, "you're as much alike as a thrush and a paroquet."

She laughed again.

"So you consider me a paroquet?"

"In comparison with Laura Wilde."

"Well, I'd have said a canary," she remarked indulgently, "but we'll let it pass. I don't see though," she serenely continued, "why a paroquet shouldn't have a feeling for a thrush?"

He shook his head, smiling. "It seems a bit odd, that's all."

"Then, if it's any interest to you to know it," pursued Gerty, with a burst of confidence, "I'd walk across Brooklyn Bridge, every step of the way, on my knees for Laura. That's because I believe in her," she wound up emphatically, "and because, too, I don't happen to believe much in anybody else"

"So you know her well?"

"I went to school with her and I adored her then, but I adore her even more to-day. Somehow she always seems to be knocking for the good in one, and it has to come out at last because she stands so patiently and waits. She makes me over every time she meets me, shapes me after some ideal image of me she has in her brain, and then I'm filled with desperate shame if I don't seem at least a little bit to correspond with it."

"I understand," said Trent slowly; "one feels her as one feels a strong wind on a high mountain. There's a wonderful bigness about her."

"It's because she's different," explained Gerty, "she's kept so apart from life that she knows it only in its elemental freshness—she has a kind of instinct for truth just as she has for poetry or for beauty, and our little quibbles, our incessant inanities have never troubled her at all."

The servant entered with a card as she finished, and after reading the name she made a quick movement of interest.

"Ask him to come up," she said to the man, adding immediately as Trent rose to go, "it's Arnold Kemper. Will you stay and see him?"

Trent shook his head, while he held out his hand with a laugh. "I won't stay," he answered; "I don't like him."

She looked up puzzled, her brows bent in an enquiring frown. "Not like him! Why, you've never met."

"What has that to do with it?" he persisted lightly. "One doesn't have to meet a man to hate him."

"One does unless one's a person of stupid prejudices."

"Well, maybe I am," he admitted, "but I have my side."

As the portières were drawn back, he turned hastily away, to come face to face with Gerty's caller the next instant upon the threshold. Keen as his curiosity was he took in, at his brief glance, only that Kemper presented a bright and brave appearance and walked with a peculiarly energetic step.

CHAPTER VII

The Irresistible Force

Gerty was leaning forward among her cushions, and as her visitor approached she held out her hand, still faintly scented with cigarettes. "Will you have coffee," she asked, "or shall I ring for tea?"

He sat down in the chair from which Trent had risen and replied with a gesture of happy physical exhaustion. "Let me have some coffee," he answered, "I've been out golfing all the morning, and if you don't prove mentally stimulating I shall fall asleep before you. How many holes do you think I played to-day?"

Gerty shrugged her shoulders over the little coffee pot. "I don't know and it doesn't interest me," she retorted. "After six months of Europe do you still make a god of physical exertion?"

The genial irony of his smile flashed back at her, and his eyes, half quizzical, half searching, but wholly kind, wandered leisurely down her slender figure. Even as he lazily sipped his coffee, with his closely clipped, rather large brown head lying against the chair-back, she was made to feel, not unpleasantly, the compelling animal magnetism—the "personal quantity," as she had called it—that lay behind the masculine bluntness of manner he affected. "Aren't you rather tumbled?" he enquired, with an

animated glance, and, though he was fond of boasting that he was the only man he knew who never flattered women, Gerty was conscious of a sudden flush and the pleased conviction that she must be looking her very best. It was a trick of his, she knew, to flatter, as it were, by paradox, to deal with delicate inuendos and to compliment by pleasant contradiction. She had not been a woman of the world without reaping the reward of knowledge, and now, as she leaned back and smiled brilliantly into his face, she knew that, despite the apparent abruptness of his beginning, they would descend inevitably to the play of personal suggestion. His measure had been taken long ago, she told herself, and lay tucked away in the receptacle which contained the varied neatly labelled patterns of her masculine world; but at the same time she was perfectly aware that within five minutes he would pique afresh both her interest and her liking. "You can't warm yourself by fireworks," she had once said to him, and a moment later had paused to wonder at the intrinsic meaning of a daring phrase which he had spoken.

Still sipping his coffee, he regarded her with the blithe humour which lent so great a charm to his expression.

"I don't see why you object to exercise when it saves my life," he observed as he took up a cigarette and then bent forward to hold it to the flame of the alcohol lamp.

"I don't object except when it bores me out of mine," responded Gerty lightly.

He was still smiling when he raised his head.

"You used to like it yourself," he persisted.

"I used to like a great many things which bore me now."

"Yes, you used to like me," he retorted gaily.

She had so confidently expected the remark, had left so frank an opening for it, that while she watched him from beneath languid eyelids a little cynical quiver disturbed her lips. The game was as old as the Garden of Eden, she had played it well or ill from her cradle, and at last she had begun to grow a trifle weary. She had found the wisdom which is hidden at the core of all Dead Sea fruit, and the bitter taste of it was still in her mouth. The world for her was a world of make-believe—of lies so futile that their pretty embroidered shams barely covered the ugly truths beneath, and, though she had pinned her faith upon falsehood and had made her sacrifice to the little gods, there were moments still when the undelivered soul within her awoke and stirred as a child stirs in the womb. Even as she went back to the game anew, she was conscious that it would be a battle of meaningless words, of shallow insincerities—yet she went back, nevertheless, before the disgust the thought awoke had passed entirely from among her sensations.

"I believe I did," she confessed with a charming shrug.

"But you turned against me in the end—women always do," he lamented merrily, as he flicked away the ashes of his cigarette. Then, with a perceptible start of recollection, he paused a moment and leaned forward to look at her more closely. "By the way, I had a shot at your friend to-day," he said, "the lady who looks like an old picture and does verse.

Why on earth did she take to poetry?" he demanded impatiently. "I hate it—it's all sheer insanity."

"Well, some few madmen have thought otherwise," remarked Gerty, adding immediately, "and so you met Laura. Oh, you two! It was the irresistible force meeting the immovable body. What happened?"

He regarded her quite gravely while his cigarette burned like a little red eye between his fingers.

"Nothing," he responded at last. "I didn't meet her—I merely glimpsed her. She has a pair of eyes—you didn't tell me."

Gerty nodded.

"And I forgot to mention as well that she has a nose and a mouth and a chin. What an oversight."

"Oh, I didn't bother about the rest," he said, and she wondered if he could be half in earnest or if he were wholly jesting, "but, by Jove, I went overboard in her eyes and never touched bottom."

For a moment Gerty stared at him in blank amazement, in the midst of which she promptly told herself that henceforth she would be prepared for any eccentricities of which the male mind might be capable. A hot flush mantled her cheek, and she spoke in a voice which had a new and womanly ring of decision.

"You would not like her," she said, "and she would hate you."

With an amused exclamation he replaced his coffee cup upon the table. "Then she'd be a very foolish woman," he observed.

"She believes in all the things that you scoff at—she believes in the soul, in people, and in love——"

He made a protest of mock dismay. "My dear girl, I've been too hard hit by love not to believe in it. On the contrary, I believe in it so firmly that I think the only sure cure for it is marriage."

At her swift movement of aversion his laughing glance made a jest of the words, and she smiled back at him with the fantastic humour which had become almost her natural manner. It was a habit of his to treat sportively even the subjects which he reverenced, and in reality she had sometimes felt him to be less of a sober cynic than herself. He took his pleasures where he found them, and there was a touch of pathos in the generous eagerness with which he was ready to provide as well for the pleasures of others. If he lacked imagination she had learned by now that he did not fail in its sister virtue, sympathy, and his keen gray eyes, which expressed so perfectly a gay derision, were not slow, she knew, to warm into a smiling tenderness.

"Laura is the most earnest creature alive," she said after a moment.

"Is that so? Then I presume she lacks a sense of humour."

"She has a sense of honour at any rate."

With a laugh he settled his figure more comfortably in his chair, and while she watched the movement, a little fascinated by its easy freedom, she felt a sudden impulse to reach out and touch his broad, strong shoulders as she might have touched the shoulders of a statue. Were they really as hard as bronze, she wondered, or was that suggestion of latent power, of slumbering energy, as deceptive as the caressing glance he bent upon her? The glance meant nothing

she was aware—he would have regarded her in much the same way had Perry been at her side, would have shone quite as affectionately, perhaps, upon her mother. Yet, in spite of her worldly knowledge, she felt herself yielding to it as to a delicate flattery. Her eyes were still on him, and presently he caught her gaze and held it by a look which, for all its fervour, had an edge of biting irony. There was a meaning, a mystery in his regard, but his words when at last they came sounded almost empty.

"Oh, that's well enough in its way," he said, "but as a safeguard there's no virtue alive that can stand against a sense of humour. An instinct for the ridiculous will keep any man from going to the devil."

She shot her defiant merriment into his face. "Has it kept you?"

"I?—Oh, I wasn't bound that way, you know—but why do you ask?"

For a breath she hesitated, then, remembering her mystification of an instant ago, she felt a swift desire to punish him for something which even to herself she could not express—for too sharp a prick of unsatisfied curiosity, or was it for too intense a moment of uncertainty?

"Oh, one hears, you know," she replied indifferently.

"One hears! And what is it that one hears?"

His voice was hard, almost angry, and she despised herself because the fierce sound of it made her suddenly afraid.

"Do you know what a man said to me the other day," she went on with a cool insolence before which he became suddenly quiet. "Whom the gods destroy they first infatuate—with an opera singer."

She delivered the words straight from the shoulder, and as she finished he rose from his chair and stood looking angrily down upon her.

"Did you let me come here for *this?*" he demanded.

"O Arnold, Arnold!" the gayety rang back to her voice, and she made a charming little face of affected terror. "If you're going to be a bear I'll run away."

She stretched out her hand, and he held it for an instant in his own, while he fell back impatiently into his chair.

"The truth is that I was clean mad about her," he said, "about Madame Alta—but it's over now, and I abominate everything that has ever set foot on the stage."

"Was she really beautiful?" she enquired curiously.

He laughed sharply. "Beautiful! She was flesh—if you mean that."

An angry sigh escaped him, and Gerty lighted a fresh cigarette and gave it to him with a soothing gesture. The nervous movements which were characteristic of him became more frequent, and she found herself wondering that they should increase rather than diminish the impression of virile force. For a while he smoked in silence; then, with his eyes still turned away from her, he asked in a changed voice.

"Tell me about your friend—she interests me."

"She interests you! Laura?"

"There's something in her that I like," he pursued, smiling at her exclamation. "She looks human, natural, real. By Jove, she looks as if she were capable of big emotions—as if, too, you could like her without making love. She's something new."

Gerty's amazement was so sincere that she only

stared at him, while her red lips parted slightly in a breathless and perfectly unaffected surprise. Something new! Her wonder faded slowly, and she told herself that now at last she understood. So he was still what he had always been—an impatient seeker after fresh sensations.

"I thought you were too much like Perry to care about her," she said.

His amused glance made the remark appear suddenly ridiculous. "I'm different from Perry in one thing at least," he retorted. "You didn't marry me."

"Well, I dare say it's a good thing you never gave me the chance," she tossed back lightly. "I don't let Perry rave, you know, even over Laura. Not that I'm unduly jealous, but that I'm easily bored."

"I can't imagine you jealous," he commented, keeping as usual close to the intimate intention.

"And of Perry! I should hope not!" Her gesture was one of amused indifference. "Jealousy is the darling virtue of the savage, and I may not be a saint, but at least I'm civilized. Give me food and a warm fire and clothes to my back, and I'm quite content to let the passions go."

"Even love?" he asked, still smiling.

She shrugged her shoulders—gracefully as few women can. "Love among the rest—I don't care—why should I? Make me comfortable."

An impulse which was hardly more than a consuming interest in humanity—in the varied phenomena of life—caused him to draw quickly nearer.

"You say that because you've 'arrived,'" he

declared. "You've 'arrived' in love as your friend has in literature. The probationary stage after all is the only one worth while, and you've gone too far beyond it."

"I've gone too far beyond everything," she protested, laughing. "I'm a graduate of the world. Now Laura——"

The name recalled his thoughts and he repeated it while she paused. "Laura—it has a jolly sound—and upon my word I haven't seen a woman in years who has had so much to say to me before I've met her. Do you know, I already like her—I like her smooth black hair, without any of your fussy undulations; I like her strong earnest look and the strength in her brow and chin; I even like the way she dresses——"

Gerty's laugh pealed out, and he broke off with a movement of irritation. "Is it possible that Laura is an enchantress," she demanded, "and have I followed the wrong principle all my life? Has my honest intention to please men led me astray?"

"Oh, you may be funny at my expense if you choose," he retorted, "but I've had enough of fluff and feathers, and I like the natural way she wears her clothes——" Again he smoked in an abstracted silence, and then asked abruptly: "Will you take me some day to see her?"

She shook her head.

"Take you? No, you've missed your opportunity."

"But I'll make another. Why not?"

"Because I tell you frankly she would hate you."

"My dear girl, she wouldn't have a shadow of an excuse. No woman has ever hated me in my life."

"Then there's no use seeking the experience. You'd just as well accept the fact at once that Laura couldn't bear you——"

A laugh followed from the door while the words were still in the air, and turning quickly they saw Laura pausing upon the threshold.

"And pray what is it about Laura?" she asked in her cordial contralto voice. "A person who has borne living in the house with a flute may be said to have unlimited powers of endurance."

She moved forward and Kemper, while he sprang to his feet and stood waiting for the introduction, became swiftly aware that with her entrance the whole atmosphere had taken a fresher and a finer quality. The sophistication of the world, the flippant irony of Gerty's voice gave place immediately before her earnest dignity and before the look of large humanity which distinguished her so vitally from the women whom he knew. He felt her sincerity of purpose at the same instant that he felt Gerty's shallowness and the artificial glamour of the hot-house air in which he had hardly drawn breath. There was an appeal in Laura's face which he had never seen before —an expression which seemed to him to draw directly from the elemental pulse; and he felt suddenly that there were depths of consciousness which he had never sounded, vivid experiences which he had never even glimpsed. "She is different—but how is she different?" he asked himself, perplexed. "Is she simply a bigger personality, or is she really more of a woman than any woman I have ever known? What is it in her that speaks to me and what is it in myself that responds?" And it seemed to him both

strange and wonderful that he should be drawn by an impulse which was not the impulse of love—that a woman should attract him through qualities which were independent of the allurement of sex. A clean and perfectly sane satisfaction was the immediate result; he felt that he had grown larger in his own eyes—that the old Adam who had ruled over him so long had become suddenly dwarfed and insignificant. "To like a woman and yet not to make love to her," he repeated in his thoughts. "By Jove, it will be something decent, something really worth while." Then he remembered that he had never known intimately a woman of commanding intellect, and the novelty inspired him with the spirit of fresh adventure.

She had bowed to him over the large muff she carried, and he spoke lightly though his awakened interest showed in his face and voice. "I was the unfortunate subject of Gerty's decision," he said. "Is there no appeal from it?"

Her answering smile was one of indifferent kindliness; and he liked, even while he resented her sincerity of manner. "Appeal! and to whom?" she enquired.

"To you—to your mercy," he laughed.

She glanced at Gerty with a look which hardly simulated a curiosity she apparently did not feel.

"But why should you need my mercy?" she demanded, as she sat down on a little sofa heaped with cushions.

His gaze, after resting a moment on the smooth black hair beneath her velvet hat, turned to the exquisite shining waves which encircled Gerty's head.

"Ask my cousin," he advised with merriment.

Whatever Gerty's reason for not caring to bring them together may have been, she concealed it now beneath a ready acceptance of the situation.

"Oh, he tried to make me promise to take him to see you," she explained, "but I've told him you'd show him no quarter because he hasn't read your poems."

Laura raised her eyes to his face, and he had again the sensation of looking into an unutterable personality.

"I'm glad you haven't read them," she rejoined, "for now you won't be able to talk to me about them."

"So you don't like to have one talk about them?"

She met his question with direct simplicity. "About my verse? I shouldn't like to have you do it."

"And why not I?" he demanded, laughing.

"Oh, I don't know," she returned, her eyes lighting with the humour of her frankness, "can one explain? But I'm perfectly sure that it's not the kind of thing you'd like. There's no action in it."

"So Gerty has told you that I'm a strenuous creature?"

"Perhaps. I don't remember." She turned to Gerty, looking down upon her with a tenderness that suffused her face with colour. "What was it that you told me, dearest?"

"What did I tell you?" repeated Gerty, still clasping Laura's hand. "Oh, it must have been that he agrees with some dreadful person who said that poetry was the insanity of prose."

Laura laughed as she glanced back at him, and he contrasted her deep contralto notes with Gerty's flute-like soprano.

"Well, he may not be right, but he is with the majority," she said.

Her indifference piqued him into the spirit of opposition, and he felt an immediate impulse to compel her reluctant interest—to arouse her admiration of the very qualities she now disdained.

"Well, I take my poetry where I find it," he rejoined, "and that's mostly in life and not in books."

From the quick turn of her head, the instant's lifting of her emotional reserve, he saw that the words had arrested her imagination—that for the first time since her entrance she had really taken in the fact of his existence as an individual.

"Then you are not with the majority, but you are right!" she exclaimed.

"Is it not possible to be both?" he asked, pleased almost more than he would admit by the quickening of her attention.

"I think not," she answered seriously, "don't you?"

"I never think," he laughed with his eyes upon hers, "I live."

The animation, which was like the glow from an inner illumination, shone in her face, and he thought, as Trent had thought before him, that her soul must burn like a golden flame within her—a flame that reached toward life, knowledge and the veiled wonders of experience.

"And so would I if I were a man," she said.

She rose, clasping the furs at her throat, then folding Gerty in her arms she kissed her cheek.

"I stopped for a moment to look at you, nothing

more," she confessed. "It was a choice between looking at you and at the Rembrandt in the Metropolitan, and I chose you." As she held Gerty from her for an instant and then drew her into her embrace again, Kemper saw that her delight in her friend's beauty was almost a rapture, that her friendship possessed something of a religious fervour.

"Do stay with me," pleaded Gerty; "I want you —I need you."

"But you dine out."

"Oh, I forgot. Wait, I'll break it. I'll be ill."

Laura smiled her refusal and, stooping, picked up her large, fluffy muff.

"I'll come to-morrow," she returned, "and it won't cost us a lie. Good bye, my bonnie, what do you wear?"

Gerty waved her hands in a gesture of unconcern.

"It rests with the fates and with Annette," she replied. "Green, blue, white; I don't care."

"But I do," persisted Laura; "let it be white." She looked at Kemper and bowed silently as she turned toward the door; then, hesitating an instant, she came back and held out her hand with a cordial smile. "It has been very pleasant to meet you," she said.

"Mayn't I at least see you down?" he asked. "How do you go?"

"There's really no need to trouble you," she answered, "I shall go a part of the way in the stage."

She went out, and as he followed her down the staircase he asked himself again the puzzling question: "She is different from other women—but how is she different?" And still he assured himself with con-

fidence that what he liked in her was her serene separateness from the appeal of passion. "This is the thing that lasts—that really lasts for a lifetime," he said in his thoughts.

CHAPTER VIII

Proves That a Poor Lover May Make an Excellent Friend

That night in her sitting-room, while she corrected the proof-sheets of her new book of verse, Laura remembered Kemper's face as he sat across from her on the long seat of the almost empty stage. Beyond him was the humming city, where the lights bloomed like white flowers out of the enveloping dusk, and when he turned his profile, as he did once, against a jeweller's window, she saw every line of his large, strongly marked features silhouetted with distinctness on a brilliant background. Twice during the ride down she had been conscious, as when they left Gerty's house together, that he was more masculine than any man she had known closely in her life, and at first she had told herself that his nervous activity—the ardent vitality in his appearance—was too aggressive to be wholly pleasing. She had been used to a considerate gentleness from men, and his manner, though frankly sympathetic, had seemed to her almost brusque.

Even now, while she laid her work aside to think of him, she was hardly sure that his genial egoism had not repelled her. Her instinct told her that he could be both kind and generous, that he was capable of unselfish impulses, and full, too, of a broad and

tolerant humanity, yet there was something within her—some finer spiritual discernment—which rose to battle against the attraction he appeared to possess. He was not mental, he was not even superficially bookish, and yet because of a certain magnetic quality—a mere dominant virility—she found herself occupied, to the exclusion of her work, with the words he had uttered, with the tantalising humour in his eyes.

"I am glad that I did not ask him to call," she thought as she took up her pencil. "He does not interest me and very likely I shall never see him again. He was pleasant certainly, but one can't make acquaintances of every stranger one happens to meet." Then it seemed to her that she had been distant, almost rude, when he had bidden her good-night, and as she remembered the engaging frankness of his smile, the eager yet humble look with which he had waited at her door for the invitation she did not give, she regretted in spite of herself that she had been so openly inhospitable. After all there was no reason that one should turn a man from one's door simply because his personality didn't please one's fancy. For a moment she dragged her mind for some word, some look in which she might have found a shadow of excuse for the dislike she felt. "No, he said nothing foolish," she confessed at last, "he was only kind and friendly and it is I who have offended—I who have allowed myself to feel an unreasonable aversion." All at once an irritation against herself pervaded her thoughts, and she determined that if she met him again she would be more cordial—that she would force herself to show a

particular friendliness. The recollection of his love for Madame Alta came to her, and she felt at the same time a sharp curiosity and a deep disgust—"A man like that must love with madness," she thought, and next, "but how do I know if it were love between them and why should I judge?" Her clasped hands went to her eyes and she prayed silently: "Keep me apart, O Lord, keep me pure and apart!"

For a while she sat with bowed head, then, as her hands fell into her lap, she broke into a little tender laugh at herself. "What a fool I am, after all," she lamented; "here I have seen a man whom I do not like—once, for an hour—and he has so troubled my quiet that I cannot put my mind upon my work. What does it matter, and why should a stranger who displeases me have power to compel my thoughts? It was but a trifle—the distraction of an hour, nothing more—and, whether I like him or not, by to-morrow I shall have forgotten his existence."

But she remembered his face as he sat across from her in the dimly lighted stage, and she felt again, with a start, that he was the first man she had ever known. "Yet he does not attract me, and I shall never see him again," she thought after a moment. She took up a little religious book from her desk and tried in vain to fix her wandering attention. Life appeared all at once very full and very beautiful, and as she thought of the thronging city around her it seemed to her that she herself and the people in the street and the revolving stars were held securely in the hand of God. The belief awoke in her that she was

shielded and set apart for a predestined good, an exalted purpose, and she wondered if the purpose were already moving toward her out of the city and if its end would be only the fulfilling of the law of her own nature. Then she thought of Angela in her closed chamber. Had she been shielded? Was she also set apart? But the thought did not disturb her, for she herself seemed of a larger growth, of a braver spirit, than Angela or than her aunts or than Uncle Percival, who had missed life also. They had been defeated, but was it not because they had lacked in themselves the courage to attain?

The next morning, after she had had her tea and toast in her room, she went, as was her custom, into Angela's chamber. Early as it was, Mrs. Payne had already apparelled herself in her paint and powder and driven down. Seen by the morning sunlight, her smeared face with its brilliant artificial smile revealed a pathos which was rendered more acute by its effect of playful grotesqueness. She was like a faded and decrepit actress who, fired by the unconquerable spirit of her art, forces her wrinkled visage to ape the romantic ecstasies of passion. Age which is beautiful only when it has become expressive of repose—of serene renouncement—showed to Laura's eyes only as a ghastly and comic travesty of youth.

Angela was having her breakfast at a little table by the window, and at Laura's entrance she turned to her with a sigh of evident relief.

"Rosa has come down to speak to you particularly," she explained. "There is something she has very heavily on her mind."

Mrs. Payne had wheeled herself about at the same

instant; and Laura, after regarding her uncertainly for a moment, impressed a light caress upon her outstretched jewelled fingers.

"I didn't sleep a wink, my dear," began the old lady in her most conciliatory tones, "not a blessed wink after Horace told me."

The questioning stare in Laura's face had the effect of jerking her up so hurriedly that the words seemed to trip and stumble upon her lips.

"I might have had it from yourself, of course," she added with an aggrieved contortion of her features, "but as I was just telling Angela, I would not for worlds intrude upon your confidence."

"But what has he told you?" asked Laura, curiously, "and what, after all, did I tell Uncle Horace?"

Mrs. Payne settled herself comfortably back in her chair, and, picking up a bit of Angela's toast from the tray, nibbled abstractedly at the crust.

"What under heaven would he have told me but the one thing?" she demanded. "Mr. Wilberforce has at last proposed."

"At last!" echoed Laura, breaking into a laugh of unaffected merriment. "Well, he *was* long about it!"

At the words Angela leaned toward her, stretching out her frail hands in a pleading gesture.

"Don't marry, Laura," she entreated; "don't—don't marry. There is only misery from men—misery and regret."

"I believe he has millions," remarked Mrs. Payne, in the tone in which she might have recited her creed in church, "and as far as a husband goes I have never observed that there was any disadvantage to

be found in age. My experience of the world has taught me that decrepitude is the only thing which permanently domesticates a man."

Laura sat down across from her, and then clasping her hands together made her final determined stand.

"You needn't try to persuade me, Aunt Rosa," she answered, "for I wouldn't marry him—no, not if he had billions."

For a brief interlude Mrs. Payne returned her gaze with silent yet expressive dignity.

"There's really no occasion to become violent," she observed at last, "particularly in the presence of poor Angela."

"But I like it! I like it," declared Angela, "it is her marriage that I couldn't bear."

Mrs. Payne turned her reproachful look for a moment upon the weaker sister.

"I am very sure, my dear, that we can bear anything the Lord chooses to send," she remarked, "especially when we feel that our cross is for another's good. Is there any reason," she wound up to Laura again, "for the obstinate position you appear to take?"

Laura shook her head.

"I don't take any position," she replied, "I simply decline to be made to marry him, that's all."

"But you like him—I've heard you say so much with my own ears."

"You never heard me say I liked him for a husband."

"It would have been highly indelicate if I had," observed Mrs Payne, "but since he has proposed I may as well impress upon you that any kind of liking is quite sufficient argument for a marriage

which would be so suitable in every way. And as to the romantic nonsense—well it all comes very much to the same thing in the long run, and whether you begin by loving a man or by hating him, after six months of marriage you can ask nothing better than to be able to regard him with Christian forbearance."

Laura turned away impatiently as Uncle Percival put his bland, child-like face in at the open door.

"I hope you had a quiet night, Angela," he said in his high, piping voice; "the morning is a fine one and I've already had my turn." Then, holding his coat closely over a small bundle which he carried, he greeted Mrs Payne with a deprecating smile. "You're down early, Rosa; it's a good habit."

Mrs Payne surveyed him with an intolerant humour.

"I'm not undertaking to cultivate a habit at my time of life," she responded, raising her voice until it sounded harsh and cracked; then she became a prey to a devouring suspicion. "What is that under your coat?" she demanded sternly.

Uncle Percival's flaccid mouth fell open with a frightened droop, and he took instantly the demeanour of a small offending schoolboy.

"It—it's only a little present for Angela," he replied. "I thought it might interest her, but I hardly think you would care for it, Rosa."

"What is it?" persisted Mrs. Payne in her unyielding calmness.

The object moved beneath his coat, and, pulling it out with a timid yet triumphant gesture, he displayed before their astonished eyes a squirming white rabbit.

"I hoped it might interest Angela," he repeated, seeking in vain for sympathy in the three amazed faces.

The rabbit struggled in his grasp, and after holding it suspended a moment by the nape of its neck, he cuddled it again beneath his coat. "A woman was selling them in the street," he explained in a suppressed voice. "She had a box filled with them. I bought only one."

"That was fortunate," returned Mrs Payne, severely, "for you will have to carry the creature back at once—or drown it if you prefer."

"But I thought Angela would like it," he said with a disappointed look.

Angela closed her eyes as if shutting out an irritating sight.

"What in the world would I do with a white rabbit?" she enquired.

"But I could take care of it," insisted Uncle Percival. "I should like to take care of it very much."

Laura drew the rabbit from his coat and held it a moment against her bosom.

"It's a pretty little thing," she remarked carelessly, and added, "why not keep it for yourself, Uncle Percival?"

As he glanced up at her the light of animation broke in his face.

"Why shouldn't I, indeed, why shouldn't I?" he demanded eagerly, and hurried out before Mrs. Payne, with her Solomonic power of judgment, could bring herself to the point of interference.

"I hope that will be a lesson to you with regard to

men," she observed as a parting shot while she tied her bonnet strings.

An uncontrollable distaste for her family swept over Laura, and she felt that she could suffer no longer the authority of Mrs. Payne, the senility of Uncle Percival or the sorrows of Angela. As she looked at Mrs. Payne she was struck as if for the first time by her ridiculous grotesqueness, and she experienced a sensation of disgust for the old lady's stony eyes and carefully painted out wrinkles.

Without replying to the moral pointed by Uncle Percival and the white rabbit, she left the room and hastily dressed herself for her morning walk. The house had grown close and oppressive to her and she wanted the January cold in her face and limbs. At the moment she was impatient of anything that recalled a restraint of mind or body.

When she came in two hours later, after a brisk walk in the park, she found Mr. Wilberforce awaiting her in the drawing-room downstairs. He looked older she thought at the first glance in the last few days, but there was a cheerfulness, a serenity, in his face which seemed to lend itself like a softening light to his beautiful pallid features. He was a man who having fought bitterly against resignation for many years comes to it peacefully at last only to find that he has reaped from it a portion of the "enchantment of the disenchanted." Her intuition told her instantly that he had given up hope of love, but she recognized also, through some strange communion of sympathy, that he had attained the peace of soul which follows inevitably upon any sincere renouncement of self.

"I am so glad, dear friend," she said, holding his hand for a moment as she sat beside him.

He looked at her silently with his brilliant eyes which burned in the midst of his blanched and withered face like two watch-fires that are kept alive in a scorched desert.

"For a while I thought it might be," he replied after a long pause. "I asked you to give me what I have never had—my youth. You could not do it," he added with a smile, "and at first it seemed to me that there remained only emptiness and disappointment for the future, but presently I learned wisdom in the night." He hesitated an instant and then added gravely, "I saw that if you couldn't give me youth, you could at least make my old age very pleasant."

"I can—I will," she answered in a broken voice, and it seemed to her that all the bitterness had turned to sweetness in his look. Was the divine wisdom, after all, she wondered, not so much the courage which turned the events that came to happiness as the greater power which created light where there was nothing. Only age had learned to do this, she knew, and she was conscious of a quick resentment against fate that only age could put into passion the immortal spirit which youth craved in vain.

"I asked a great deal," he said, "but I shall be content with a very little."

"With my whole faith—with all my friendship," she replied; and as she spoke the words, her heart contracted with a spasm which was almost that of terror of the unknown purpose to which she felt, with a kind of superstitious blindness, that she was

pledged. Fate had offered her this one good thing, and she must put it from her because she waited in absolute ignorance—for what? For love it might be, and yet her woman's instinct taught her that the only love which endures is the love of age that has never been young for youth so elastic that it can never grow old. Then swift as the flash of self-revelation she saw in imagination the eager yet humble look with which Arnold Kemper had waited before her door, and, though she insisted still that the picture displeased her fancy, she knew that passion to meet response in her must come to her clothed in a virile strength like his.

"I wish from my soul that it might have been," she murmured, but even with the words she knew that she had all her life wished for a different thing—for a love that was wholly unlike the love he offered.

"It has been," he answered, while his grave gentleness fell like dew on the smouldering fire in his eyes. "It has been, my dear, and it will be always until I die."

CHAPTER IX

Of Masques and Mummeries

In the afternoon of the next day Laura received by a special messenger an urgent appeal from Gerty Bridewell.

"Come to me at once," said the note, which appeared to have been written in frantic haste. "I am in desperate trouble and I need you."

The distress of the writer was quite as apparent as the exaggeration, and while Laura rolled rapidly toward her in a cab, she prepared herself with a kind of nervous courage to bear the brunt of the inevitable scene. Perry was at the bottom of it she knew—she had answered such summonses often enough before to pre-figure with unerring insight the nature of the event. He had shown his periodical inclination to a fresh affair, his errant fancy had wandered in a particular direction, and Gerty's epicurean philosophy had failed as usual to account for the concrete fact. To Laura the amazing part was not so much Perry's fickleness, which she had brought herself to accept with tolerant aversion, as the extraordinary value Gerty placed upon an emotion which was kept alive by an artifice at once so evident and so ineffectual. There was but one thing shorter lived than his repentance she knew, and that was the sentiment of which he was charitably supposed to have repented.

By nature he was designed a lover, and it seemed, broadly viewed, the merest accident of circumstances that he should tend toward variety rather than toward specialisation.

A man passing in the street bowed to her as the cab turned a corner, and, as she recognised Arnold Kemper, she wondered vaguely if he had aught in common with his cousin. A slight resemblance to Perry Bridewell offended her as she recalled it, and, while her resentful sympathy flew to Gerty, she felt almost vindictive against the masculine type he appeared physically to represent.

"O Lord, keep me apart!" she prayed fervently, as she had prayed in the night, for it appeared to her that the shield of faith was the one shield for the spirit against the besieging vanities of life. Gerty's faith had fallen from her long ago, and, as she remembered this, Laura felt a jealous impulse to snatch her friend away from the restless worldliness and the inordinate desires. The pitiable soul of Gerty showed to her suddenly as a stunted and famished city child struggling for life in an atmosphere which carried the taint of death, and in her imagination the picture was so vivid that she saw the face of the child turned toward her with a wistful, imploring look.

The cab stopped with a jerk, and in a little while she was knocking softly at the closed door of Gerty's chamber. Almost immediately it opened and the French maid came out.

"Madame is ill with a headache," she explained, pointing to the closed shutters, "she refuses to eat."

Putting her impatiently aside, Laura closed the door upon her, and then crossing to the windows threw back the shutters to let in the late sunshine.

"A little light won't hurt you, dearest," she said, with a smile.

Gerty, still in her nightgown with a Japanese kimono flung carelessly about her and her hair falling in a brilliant shower upon her shoulders, was sitting before her bureau making a pretence of sorting a pile of bills. In spite of this pathetic subterfuge, her beautiful green eyes held a startled and angry look, and her face was flushed with an excitement like that of fever.

"I was sorry I sent for you the moment afterward," she said, hardly yielding to Laura's embrace, while she nervously tore open a bill she held and then tossed it aside without glancing over it. "It's the same thing over again—there's no use talking about it. I shall die."

"You cannot—you cannot," protested Laura, still holding her in her arms. "You are too beautiful. You were never in your life lovelier than you are to-day."

"And yet it does not hold him," broke out Gerty, in sudden passion, "and it will never be any better, I see that. If it's not one it's another, but it's always somebody. A year ago he promised me that I should never have cause for jealousy again—he swore that and I believed him—and now this—this——"

Her anger choked her like a sob, and she tore with trembling fingers at the papers in her lap. Then suddenly her brow contracted with resolution, and she went through a long list of items as if the most impor-

tant fact in life were the amount of money she must pay to her dressmaker.

"Of course you know what I think," murmured Laura with her lips at Gerty's ear.

"That he isn't worth it," Gerty nodded, while her indignant and humiliated expression grew almost violent. "Well, I think so, too. Of course he isn't, but that doesn't make it any better—any easier."

"You mean you couldn't give him up?"

"When I'm dead I may, not before." She closed her eyes and a long shudder ran through her body. "It has been nothing but a fight since I married—a fight to keep him. I used to think that marriage meant rest, contentment, but I know now that it means a battle—all the time—every instant. I've never had one natural moment, I've never since the beginning been without a horrible suspicion—and I see now that I never shall be. He likes me best I know—in his heart he really puts me first—but there are others and I won't have it. I'll be alone, I'll be the only one or nothing. I said I wouldn't be beaten the first time, and I won't—I won't be beaten." She paused an instant to draw breath. "And I haven't been," she wound up in bitter triumph.

"You'll never be, darling," declared Laura; "who is there on earth to shine against you?"

The violence faded from Gerty's face, yielding to an expression of disgust, of spiritual loathing—the loathing of a creature that hates the thing it loves.

"But it isn't worth it, it isn't worth it," she moaned, pushing the papers away from her with an indignant gesture, and rising from her chair to walk hurriedly up and down the floor. "It isn't worth it, but I'm

bound to it—I can't get away. I'm bound to the wheel. Do you think if I could help myself—if I could be different—that I would turn into a mere bond-slave to my body? Why, a day labourer has rest, but I haven't. There's not a moment when I'm not doing something for my beauty, or planning effects, or undergoing a treatment. I never sleep as I want to, nor bathe as I want to, nor even eat what I like. It's all somebody's system for preserving something about me. I've lived on celery and apples to keep from growing fat and taken daily massage to keep from getting thin—and yet I never wake up in the morning that I don't turn sick for fear I'll discover my first wrinkle in the glass. Now imagine," she finished with a cynical laugh, "Perry going upon a diet for any sentimental reasons, or sacrificing terrapin in order to retain my affection!"

"I can't," confessed Laura bluntly, "it's beyond me, but I wish you wouldn't. I wish you'd try to hold him by something different—something higher."

"You can't hold a person by what he hasn't got," returned Gerty with the flippant ridicule she so desperately clung to—a ridicule which she used as unsparingly upon herself as upon her husband. Then, after a pause, she resumed her bitter musing in the same high-strung, reckless manner. "A wrinkle would kill me," she pursued; "I'd rather endure any agony—I'd be skinned alive first like some woman Perry laughed about. Yet they must come—they're obliged to come in fifteen—ten—perhaps in five years. Perhaps even to-morrow. Do you suppose," she questioned abruptly, with a tragic intensity worthy of a less ignoble cause, "that when one gets old one really

ceases to mind—that one dies out all inside—the sensations I mean, and the emotions—before the husk begins to wither?" She paused a moment, but as Laura continued to regard her with a soft, compassionate look she turned away again and, touching an electric button in the wall, flooded the room with light. The change was so startling that every object seemed to leap at once from twilight vagueness into a conspicuous prominence. On a chair in the corner was carelessly flung a white chiffon dinner gown, and a pair of little satin slippers had been thrown upon the floor beside it, where they lay slightly sideways, with turned-out toes, as they had fallen from the wearer's feet. The pathos which seems so often to dwell in trifling inanimate objects spoke to Laura from the little discarded shoes, and again society appeared to her as a hideous battle in which the passions preyed upon the ideals, the body upon the soul. She thought of Perry Bridewell, of his healthy animalism, his complacent self-esteem, while her heart hardened within her. Was love, when all was said, merely a subjection to the flesh instead of an enlargement of the spirit? Did it depend for its very existence upon the dressmaker's art and the primitive instinct of the chase? Had it no soul within it to keep it clean? Could it see or hear only through the eye or the ear of sense?

"O Gerty, Gerty," she said, "if I could only make you see!"

But Gerty, with one of those swift changes of humour which made her moods at once so unexpected and so irresistible, had burst into a peal of mocking laughter.

"I'm prepared to conquer or to die," she said merrily; and going to a large white box on the bed, she opened it and dangled in the air a gorgeous evening gown of silver gauze shot with green. "This cost me a thousand dollars," she commented in the hard, business-like tones Laura had begun to dread. "I was keeping it for the ball next week, but there's no call like the call of an emergency. The horrid creature he fancies will be there," she added, surveying her exquisite armful with an admiring, unhappy glance, "and it will be war to the death between us, if it costs him every cent he has." She fell thoughtfully silent, to break out at the end of a minute or two with a remark which had the value of an imparted confidence: "She—I mean the creature—wore one something like it, only not nearly so handsome—last night—and it made her look frightfully gone off—even Perry noticed it."

Spreading the gown carefully upon the bed, she went to the mirror and regarded herself with passionate scrutiny.

"Will you wait and see me dress?" she asked; "Annette has my cold bath ready. I must have a colour, but I shan't be a minute in the tub."

"Do you mean that you are really going out tonight?" asked Laura, remembering the despairing note of a few hours ago.

Gerty nodded "To a dinner and a dance. Do you think that I will play the neglected wife?"

A glow had sprung to her eyes that was like the animation with which an intrepid hunter might depart upon a desperate chase—and through all her elaborate toilette—the massaging of her face, the

arranging of her hair, the perfuming of her beautiful neck and arms—she chatted gayly in the same flippant yet nervous voice. When at last the maid had withdrawn again, Gerty, pausing before Laura in a shimmer of silver gauze that reminded one of a faintly scented moonlight, bent over and touched her cheek with feverish lips.

"It is war to the knife," she laughed; and the peculiar radiance of colour, which gave her beauty a character that was almost violent, made her at the moment appear triumphant, exultant, barbaric. To Laura she had never seemed more beautiful nor more unhappy. Then suddenly her manner underwent a curious change, and her accustomed mask—the smiling surface of a woman of the world—settled as if by magic upon her face. Perry Bridewell was at the door, and she opened it for him with an unconcern at which Laura wondered.

"Come in if you want to," she said coolly, "Laura doesn't mind."

She drew back into the middle of the room, fastening her glove with insolent indifference, while his startled gaze hung upon her in an amazement he lacked the mental readiness to hide.

"By Jove, are you going out?" he asked. "I thought you were downright ill and I was about to call up the doctor. I'm jolly glad—I declare I am," he added humbly.

From the sincere anxiety in his voice, Laura surmised at once that Gerty's exasperation had preceded by some hours her cooler judgment. He looked as uncomfortable as it was possible for a man of his optimistic habit of mind to feel, and an evident

humiliation was traced upon his countenance as if by several hasty touches of a crayon pencil.

But his features were intended so manifestly to wear a look of cheerful self-esteem that his dejection, honest as it was, produced an effect of insincerity, and it seemed to Laura that his other and more natural expression was still lying somewhere beneath this superficial remorse. Considered as physical bulk he was impressive, she admitted, in a large, ruddy, highly obvious fashion; then he appeared suddenly so stupid and child-like in his discomfiture that she felt her heart softening in spite of her convictions. At the instant he resembled nothing so much as a handsome, good-humoured, but disobedient, dog patiently awaiting a reprimand.

"On my word I'm jolly glad," he repeated, and stopped because he could think of nothing further to say that did not sound foolish in his own perturbed mind.

"Oh, I'm not utterly lacking in humanity," retorted Gerty, "and one has to be not to admit a moral obligation to one's hostess. Besides," she confessed, with smiling pleasantry, "I shall rather enjoy Ada Lawley's face when she sees my gown. She told me last night that she would never be caught wearing silver gauze again until she wanted to look every day as old as she really is. It was rather hard on her, poor thing, for Arnold says she'd rather lose her character any day than her complexion—not that she has very much of either left by now," she corrected with her cutting laugh.

Before the studied insolence of her attack Perry drew back quickly in surprise, and his eyelids winked

rapidly as if a lighted candle had flashed before them. Then, with that child-like need of having his eyes opened, of being made to *see*, his attention was fastened upon the brilliant figure of his wife, and her beauty seemed at the moment to burn itself into his slow-witted brain.

"By Jove!" he exclaimed, and again, "By Jove!"

"I'm glad you like it," replied Gerty, with a careless shrug. "I may not be a model woman from a domestic point of view, but at least I've managed to keep both my colour and my reputation." She crossed to the bureau, and opening a drawer took out a green and silver fan. "I really needn't trouble you to come, you know," she remarked indifferently. "Arnold will be there and I dare say he'll be willing to come back in my carriage."

"I dare say he will," observed Perry, not without a jealous indignation, "and I dare say you'd be pleased enough if I'd let him."

Gerty laughed as she closed the drawer with a bang. "Well, I shouldn't exactly mind," she rejoined.

Reconciliation, such as it was, the brief reunion of suspicion and broken faith was apparently in rapid progress, and, filled with a pity not unmixed with disgust, Laura put on her fur coat and went slowly down the staircase. The last sound that followed her was the flute-like music of Gerty's laugh—a little tired, heart-sick, utterly disillusioned laugh.

A man was going by on the sidewalk as she went out, and when the closing of the house door caused him instinctively to look up, she saw that it was

Roger Adams. He stopped immediately and waited for her until she descended the steps.

"Are you bound now," he asked, "for Gramercy Park?"

She nodded. "But I'd like to walk a block or two. I've been shut up all the afternoon with Gerty."

"She's not ill, I hope," he remarked, as he fell into step at her side. "I've always had a considerable liking for Mrs. Bridewell, and for Perry, too. He's a first-rate chap."

For a moment Laura walked on rapidly, without replying. It seemed to her abominable that Adams should confess to an admiration for Perry Bridewell, and the generous humanity which she had formerly respected in him now offended her.

"He is not a favourite of mine," she commented indifferently; then moved by a flitting impulse, she added after a pause, "By the way, do you know, I've met his cousin."

Adams looked a little mystified as he echoed her remark.

"His cousin?" But in an instant further light broke upon him. "Oh, you mean Arnold Kemper!"

"I met him at Gerty's," explained Laura, "but I can't say honestly that he particularly appealed to me. There's something about him—I don't know what—that runs up against my prejudices."

Adams laughed.

"I rather fancy the prejudices are more than half gossip," he observed.

"I'd forgotten what I'd heard about him," rejoined Laura, shaking her head.

They had reached a crossing, and he dropped a little behind her while she walked on with the flowing yet energetic step she had inherited from her Southern mother. On the opposite corner he came up with her again and resumed the conversation where they had let it fall.

"I never see Kemper now," he said, "but I still feel that we are friends in a way, and I believe if I were to run across him to-morrow he'd be quite as glad to see me as if we hadn't parted fifteen years ago. The last time I saw much of him, by the way, we roughed it together one autumn on the coast of Nova Scotia, and I remember he volunteered there to go out in the first heavy gale to bring in some fishermen who had been caught out in the ice. They tied a rope around his waist and he went and brought the men in, too, though we feared for a time that his hands would be frozen off."

"Oh, I dare say he has pluck," observed Laura, and though her voice was constrained, she was conscious of a sudden moral exhilaration, such as she sometimes experienced after reading a great poem or seeing a Shakespearian tragedy upon the stage. The lights and the noises and the people in the street became singularly vivid, while she moved on in an excitement which she could not explain though she felt that it was wholly pleasurable. Kemper was present to her now in a nobler, almost a glorified, aspect, and she began, though she herself was hardly aware of it, to idealise him with the fatal ardour of a poet and a dreamer. There was a splendour to her in his old heroic deed—a glow that transfigured, like some clear northern light, the storm and the danger

and even the ice-bound fishermen—and she told herself that it would be impossible ever to atone to him for her past rudeness.

"Perhaps I was unjust," she remarked presently, "but one is never proof against intuitive impressions, and after all it does not greatly matter."

Then she looked at Roger Adams as he walked in the electric light beside her. She saw how haggard were the lines in his face, that he was bent in the shoulders as if from some mental burden, and the delicacy of his long, slender figure appeared to her almost as a physical infirmity. It occurred to her at the instant that his bodily defects had never before showed so plainly to her eyes, and it was with a flash of acute self-consciousness—a flash as from a lantern that has been turned inward—that she realised that she was comparing him with Arnold Kemper.

CHAPTER X

Shows the Hero to be Lacking in Heroic Qualities

When he had parted from Laura Adams walked down Fifth Avenue to Thirty-fifth Street and then turned east in the direction of his own house. He found upon entering that Connie, as usual, was dining out, and after he had eaten his poorly served dinner alone in the dining-room, he went upstairs with the intention of slipping into his smoking jacket and returning to his study for a peaceful smoke. The electric lights were blazing in Connie's bedroom, and when he went in to extinguish them, moved by some instinct of economy, he found that the room was in even greater disorder than that to which he had grown, after years of uncomplaining discomfort, outwardly if not inwardly resigned. Of a naturally systematic habit of thought, Connie's carelessness had been for him one of those petty annoyances of daily life to meet which he had always felt that philosophy had been especially designed; but to-night the chaos struck him so forcibly that he found himself vaguely questioning if it were possible for a human creature to sleep in such a spot? Picking up several gowns from the middle of the floor, he returned them to the wardrobe, and set himself to clearing the bed of an array of satin shoes. Her silver hair brushes had fallen on the hearth rug.

and in replacing them upon the bureau his eye fell on a small, half-empty phial lying beneath a pile of lace-edged handkerchiefs. Looking at it a little closer he found that it contained a solution of cocaine.

For a moment surprise held him motionless; then as if to refute and explain away any ordinary reason for her possession of the drug, he remembered, in a comprehensive flash the recent violent changes in her character — her uncontrollable attacks of nervousness, her spasmodic movements and her sudden flowing, almost hysterical, volubility of speech. His heart contracted with a sensation like that of terror, and he was turning away again when his glance was arrested by a heap of crumpled bills lying loosely in one corner of the open drawer. Recollecting that she had complained the day before of the smallness of her allowance, he drew out the papers for a casual examination—but it needed much less, in fact, than this to assure him that her expenses had not only gone immeasurably beyond her own limited allowance, but that they had considerably exceeded his slightly larger income. Her debts had evidently run up to a sum which she had lost the courage to confess even to herself, and, while the gravity of the situation entered into him, he smoothed out the torn and crumpled sheets and went with them to his study. Until to-night he had looked upon Connie's extravagance merely as an innocent childish failing, resulting from an inherent incapacity, as she laughingly said, "to do sums," but now as he sat under the green lamp shade, anxiously multiplying item after item, it seemed to him that this recent recklessness involved not only her private happiness

but his own personal honour. He was a hot-tempered man by nature, and at first the very absurdity of her expenditures, the useless, costly trifles which made up the amount, produced in him an unreasoning passion of anger. Had she been in the house he would have gone to her in the first shock of his temper, but her ceaseless pursuit of pleasure had put her beyond his reach, so he sat silently staring at the neatly arranged heap of papers while his exasperation cooled within him.

Presently, still sitting motionless in his chair, he felt the absolute quiet of the room take effect upon his mood, and with the peculiar tolerance confirmed as much by balked ambition as by years of enforced and bitter patience he began with a philosophic and impersonal leniency to soften in his judgment of Connie's case. At the moment there was no tenderness, he told himself, in the view he took, and he gave to her merely the distant, habitual charity that he would have extended to the stranger in the street. To give to her in the very least seemed to him suddenly almost impossible when he remembered that from a forlornly foolish caprice she had plunged him into a debt of several years. He had worked hard, with broken health, in a profession of small financial returns, but to his own simple tastes his income might have brought not only perfect material ease, but the enjoyment of comparative luxury. Still there was Connie—he had always in every situation remembered that there was Connie—and in order to insure her present comfort as well as to provide for her future livelihood, he had contrived to limit his expenses to the merest necessities. One

only gratification he had allowed himself—his eyes travelled gloomily round his precious book-lined walls and he found himself wondering if those particular treasures would bring their full value in the open market? He regarded them meditatively, almost religiously, with the impassioned eye of the collector who is born not cultivated. Yet there were among them no high-priced, particular rarities, for he had always counted the cost with the deliberation which he felt to be the better part of impulse. Financially they did not represent a great deal, he admitted; then, as if flinching before a threatened sacrilege, he looked away again, while he remembered with a quick recognition of the ludicrous, that among the articles for which Connie had not paid was a pair of pearl ear-rings. The item had taken a prominence oddly out of keeping with its significance, and he found that it irritated him more than the thought of objects of a decidedly greater cost. That any woman, that his wife in particular, should want a pair of ear-rings appeared to him little short of the barbaric.

But the incident was trifling, and a minute later it had faded entirely from his reflections. As he sat there in his easy-chair in the lamp light his thoughts turned slowly backward, travelling over the tragic yet uneventful history of his life. He remembered his childhood on a little Western farm, the commonplace poverty of his people, and his own burning, agonised ambition, which had sent him through college on a pittance, swept the highest honours from his graduation year, and wrecked at last what had been at his starting out a fairly promising physical

constitution. He recalled, too, the sleepless enthusiasm of his last term at Harvard, the terrible exhaustion which had made his final triumph barren, and the long illness which had brought him in the end, with shattered health, to the door of the great specialist in lung diseases. At this day he could shut his eyes and summon back with distinctness the smallest detail of the interview. He went over again his tedious wait in the outer office—the scattered magazines upon the table, the utterly inartistic prints upon the wall, the ticking of the tall bronze clock on the mantel, and even the number of the page he had been reading in a periodical, for—following a methodical habit—he had unconsciously made a mental note of the figures when he laid the magazine aside to face the examination behind the folding doors. With the patient attention to minutia which was a part of his literary instinct, his memory followed the great man across the ugly yellow squares in the carpet and fixed itself upon a row of small green bottles standing in a wooden rack upon the table. Through the half hour of his visit, which brief as it was casually dismissed him to his death, those slender green phials seemed to his fancy to hold an absurd and grotesque prominence. "In a climate like this I'd give you three years—maybe a little longer—yes, I think I may grant a little longer," the great man had remarked, with what seemed to Adams a ridiculous assumption of yielding a concession. "In a dryer air you might even be good, we may say, until thirty-five or forty." He shrugged his shoulders with a gesture intended to convey his sympathy but which succeeded only in expressing his personal importance,

and Adams had walked out from the stuffy little ether-smelling office with a feeling curiously like that he had known as a boy when during a school game of football, he found himself suddenly thumped upon the heart. On the doorstep he had stopped and laughed aloud, struck by the persistency with which the green bottles dominated his impressions.

After this there had come a blank of a few weeks—a blank of which he remembered nothing except that he had struggled like an entrapped beast against his fate—against his fruitless labour, his sacrificed ambition, the unavailing bitterness of his self-denial—against the world, destiny, life, death, God! But the very intensity of his rebellion had brought reaction, and it was in the succeeding apathy of spirit that he had packed his few belongings and started for the Colorado country. Behind him he was leaving all that made life endurable in his eyes, and yet he was leaving it from some half animal instinct which caused him to preserve the mere naked strip of existence that he no longer valued. He hated himself for going, yet he went that he might hate himself the more bitterly with each step of the journey.

The lamp on his desk flared up fitfully and as he turned to lower the wick his eyes fell on Connie's picture. The uplifted babyish face came back to him as he had first seen it under floating cherry-colored ribbons, and his anger of the last half-hour melted and vanished utterly away. For the sake of those few months, when the waning fire within him had leaped despairingly toward the flame of life, he knew that he could never quite put Connie

from his heart—for the sake of his short romance and for the sake, too, of his child that had lived three hours. The thin, heavily veined hand on the arm of his chair quivered for an instant, and he felt his pulses throb quickly as if from acute physical pain. From the pitiable failure of his marriage, from his loneliness and disillusionment there came back to him the three hours when he had looked upon the face of his living child—the hours of his profoundest emotion, his completest reconciliation. He had never regarded himself as an emotionally religious man, yet ten years ago, on the night that his boy died, he had felt that an immortal and indissoluble part of himself had gone out into the void. For the first time he had come to the deeper reality of life—through the flowing of the agonised longing within himself toward that permanent universal consciousness of which all human longings are but detached and wandering forms. From that time death had held for him a more personal promise; and the obligation to live, to fulfil one's present opportunities, had become charged with another meaning than he had been used to read into what he called his mere animal responsibility. The boy who had died was for him in a close, an intimate relation, still vitally alive; and with one of those quaint yet pathetic blendings of memory with imagination the little undeveloped soul had blossomed, not invisibly, incommunicably, but into actual daily companionship with his thoughts.

Sitting there under the green lamp, he himself showed as an insignificant figure to possess an ear for the divine silences, an eye for the invisible beauty. His long, gaunt body lay relaxed and inert

upon the leather cushions, and his knotted, bony hands—the hands of a scholar and a thinker—were stretched, palms downward, on the rolled arms of his chair. There was nothing in his appearance—nothing in his worn, humorous face under the thin brown hair, to suggest the valiant lover, the impressionable dreamer. Yet in the innermost truth of his own nature he was both, and his grief, of which in his strange, almost savage, reserve he had never spoken even to his wife, had softened gradually into the gentlest of his dreams as well as the profoundest of his regrets. "The little chap," as he always called the child, in his thoughts, had grown for him into an individuality which for all its nearness was yet clearly distinct from his own. Adams had lived day by day with him, had sat face to face with him in his lamp-lighted room, had carried him successfully through the first childish books that he might have studied, had even launched him into the Latin he might have learned. A boy to train, to educate, a mental companionship such as he loved to fancy he would have found in a young, eager mind, had since his marriage become the one burning desire of his heart, and even to-night sitting, as he so often did, alone in his house, his thoughts dwelt with a playful tenderness upon the boy who might have brought his *Cæsar* to his footstool. He was a man of instinctive moral cleanness, and even in his imagination he had always kept the riotous senses severely in the check of reason. In the domain of the affections he had wanted nothing desperately, he told himself, except his child; and so intense had this yearning of fatherhood become in him that there

were moments of bitter loneliness when he seemed almost to feel the touch of the boy's hand upon his knee. He had strange hours, even when his dream became more vivid to him than the pressing reality of events.

The clicking of the latchkey as it was put into the lock aroused him presently, and immediately afterward he heard the closing of the outer door, a brief "Good-night!" in Connie's high-pitched voice, and her rapid steps as they crossed the carpet in the hall. While he waited, hesitating to follow her upstairs, his door opened and shut quickly, and she came in and threw herself into a chair beside the lamp. Her blonde head fell heavily back upon the cushions and the light, streaming directly upon her face, revealed to his startled eyes all the intenser angularities produced by the last twelve months—angularities which seemed, somehow, to belong less to the features themselves than to the restless intelligence which lay behind them. Connie's features had always appeared too small for expression; too correctly formed for any deviating individuality, but the impression made upon Adams now was that they had grown so thin—so transparent in their fineness—that he looked through them to the nervous animation confined and struggling in her fragile body. The same animation throbbed like a pulse in her emaciated bosom, which only the extreme smallness of her bones kept still lovely in its low-cut evening gown. She was devoured, consumed by the agony of restlessness which shook through her, directing and controlling her slender judgment like a perpetual and imperfectly subdued convulsion of passion.

For an instant he looked at her in attentive silence, then, as her fingers wrestled uncertainly with the cords of her evening wrap, he rose from his chair and bent forward to assist her.

"It's in a hard knot," she said irritably. "I can't undo it."

While he released the fastening and drew back, his glance fell upon the little bluish hollows in her temples, over which the light curls were skilfully arranged, and as he realised fully her wasted physical resources, it seemed to him that an allusion to anything so sordid as a mere financial difficulty would sound not only trivial but positively indecorous as well. With a whimsical trick of memory he recalled abruptly a man under sentence of death in a Western gaol who had received the night before his execution a bill for a dozen bottles of champagne. Connie's extravagance appeared to him suddenly but a kind of moral champagne—the particular *hasheesh* that she had chosen from unhappy consciousness. To live at all one must live with a dream, he knew, and to his present flashing vision it seemed that Connie's ecstasy of possession and his own ecstasy of desire served a like end when they transfigured for a little while the brutal actuality from which there was no escape except by the way of a man's own soul.

"You're ill," he said at last in a compassionate voice, "and there's nothing for you but to get out of New York as soon as possible."

She looked disconcerted, almost incensed, by the suggestion.

"You can't send me to Florida," she returned, "and that's where everybody goes at this season."

A trembling like that of faintness which is fought off by an effort of will ran over her, and he watched the pale, unsteady quiver of her eyelids.

"I will send you there—I'll send you anywhere," he said, "if you will promise me——"

The words were hard to come, and while he stumbled over them she looked up with a startled exclamation. Her glance travelling to his face, swept over the desk beside which he stood and was arrested by the pile of unpaid bills, which he had pushed, as he spoke, further away from the lamp light. A hot, angry flush overspread her face, and she made a nervous movement that brought her to her feet with a spring.

"You had no right to look at them," she burst out sharply, "they are all wrong. Half of them were not meant for me."

The lie was so foolish, so ineffectual and without excuse, that he flinched and turned his eyes away—for the shame of it seemed to belong less to her than to himself. At the instant he was conscious of a stinging sensation in his veins as of a man who realises for the first time that he has fallen into dishonour.

"I did not mean to mention that—at least not now," he said quickly. "We'll call it off and try to keep clean out of debt in the future. I fear your allowance does seem rather shabby to you, but it can't be helped. It takes every cent of the balance to run the house and pay my life insurance."

He waited an instant, hoping that his matter-of-fact statement of the situation—his freedom from implied reproach—might call forth some expression, however slight, of her appreciation. But her glance flashed

over him, critical, disapproving, and he became aware, through a wonder of intuition, that even at the moment she was possessed by her passion for externals, was weighing his personal details as he stood in the lamp light, and deciding impartially that he made but a poor physical showing. Her unfavourable verdict was impressed upon him so strongly that it produced a revulsion of anger. He felt, somehow, that their positions were reversed, that she had him now at her mercy, and failing to reduce him by flattery, had chosen to wither him by contempt.

"There's not a woman I know who could dress decently on what I have," she rejoined, skilfully adjusting him into the necessity of defence.

He gathered up the papers, and placing them in a drawer of his desk, closed it sharply. There was a sordid indecency about the discussion which stung him like the stroke of a whip.

"I am sorry," he returned coolly, "but I have done my best. There is nothing more to be said." His eyes lingered for a moment on her thin bosom where the bones were beginning to be faintly visible through the ivory flesh. Then he looked at her sharpened face and saw that the three little wrinkles were stamped indelibly between her eyebrows. As he watched her she lifted her head with the babyish tilt he had first seen under cherry-coloured ribbons. "I will find the money to send you to Florida," he said slowly, "if you will promise me—to give up drugs."

She gathered her wraps about her and made a movement as if to leave the room. "Drugs! Why, how ridiculous!" she exclaimed with a laugh, though he felt the cold edge of hatred in her voice.

Still laughing, she went out and up the staircase, and a few minutes afterwards he heard her nervous step in the room above. He took out the bills again and spent half the night in the effort to realise the exact amount of his indebtedness.

CHAPTER XI

In Which a Lie is the Better Part of Truth

At breakfast Connie did not appear—she had seemed to be asleep when he went into his dressing-room—and it was not until one o'clock that he had a chance to speak to her again. Luncheon was already on the table when he entered the dining-room, and Connie, in a green velvet gown and a little green velvet hat ornamented by a twinkling aigrette, was standing by the window looking out restlessly at the falling snow. As he came in she went over to the table and began making tea with nervous hands. She was apparently in the highest spirits, and while she fumbled noisily with the cups and saucers she rambled on in her expressionless voice with tinkling interludes of her shrill, falsetto laughter. As he watched her in shamed silence he remembered with astonishment that it had taken him almost ten years to find out that Connie was vulgar. Now at last his eyes were opened—he had achieved a standard of comparison and he felt her commonness with an awakening of his literary instinct, quite as acutely, he told himself, as he should have felt it had she been presented to him in the form of a printed page. The sense of remoteness, of strangeness, grew upon him at each instant; he realised the uselessness of his good intentions toward her—the utter impossibility of

snatching her or any human creature from the clutch of temperament.

Her day was filled with engagements, she told him at the end of luncheon when she rose to hurry off while he still lingered over his coffee; "and I shan't be here to dine, either," she added, as an after thought. "Gus Brady will come for me—there's the opera and a supper afterwards, so you needn't trouble to sit up."

"But whom are you going with?" he enquired, filled for the first time with a painful curiosity concerning the social body in which Connie moved.

She shook her head with a gesture of irritation, while the aigrette in her hat sent out little iridescent flashes of blue and green. "Oh, you wouldn't know if I told you," she answered impatiently, and left the room so hastily that he felt she had meant to wriggle away from the repeated question. What did it mean? he wondered for a minute as he slowly sipped his coffee. Even if she should go with Brady alone, where was the harm of it? and why should she avoid so innocent an admission. He was of a candidly unsuspicious nature, and since in his own mind he had seen no particular reason for infringing upon the conventions of society they had never given him so much as an unquiet thought. Certainly to dine at a restaurant or attend so public a function as grand opera with a person of the opposite sex, seemed to him a singularly harmless choice of indiscretions, and had she made a careless avowal of her intention the matter would probably have dropped at the moment from his thoughts. But the very secretiveness of her manner —the suggestion of a hidden motive which dwelt in her nervous movements and even quivered in the

little scintillating aigrette on her blonde head—aroused in him if not a positive distrust, still a bewildering and decidedly unpleasant confusion of ideas. He felt, somehow, vaguely impelled to action, yet for the life of him, he admitted after a moment, he could see no single direction in which action with regard to his wife would not savor of the indiscreet, if not of the ridiculous. The attitude of an aggrieved husband had always showed to him as something laughable, and an explosion of jealousy had never appeared more vulgar than it did while he sat patiently conjecturing if such a domestic cyclone might be counted upon to shake Connie to her senses. In the end he gave it up as a farce which he felt it would be beyond the power of his gravity to sustain. "I'll do anything in reason, heaven knows," he found himself confessing, after the instant's reflection, "but I'll be hanged before I'll set out in cold blood to play the fool."

The front door, closing with a bang, brought him instantly to his feet and, glancing through the window, he saw Connie about to step into a cab which she had signalled from the sidewalk. Her velvet gown trailed behind her, and she appeared perfectly unconcerned by the fact that she had sunk above her ankles in the heavy snowdrifts. A moment later, when she lifted her train to enter the cab, he discovered to his amazement that she was wearing low kid shoes with the thinnest of silk stockings. Then, before he could raise the window for a protest, the cab rolled off in the direction of Fifth Avenue, and, wet feet and twinkling feather, she was out of sight.

By the time he had got into his overcoat and followed her into the street, the snow had begun to

fall more rapidly in large powdery flakes, which soon covered him in a thick, frosty coating from head to foot. As he walked briskly toward his office, he noticed with a quickened attention the women who like Connie, with nervous faces showing above elaborate gowns, were borne swiftly past him in hired cabs. Something, he hardly knew what, had opened his eyes to that glittering life of the world of which he had always been profoundly ignorant, and it seemed to him suddenly that the distance between himself and his wife had broadened to an impassable space in a single night. Connie was no longer the girl whom he remembered under cherry-coloured ribbons. She came in reality no closer to him than did the tired, restless women, with artificially brightened faces, who appeared to his exhausted eyes to whirl past him perpetually in cabs. A passionate regret seized him for the thing which Connie was not and could never be again—for the love he had never known and for the fatherhood that had been denied him.

He had turned, still plunged in his thoughts, into a quiet cross street where a crowd of ragged urchins were snowballing one another in a noisy battle; and as he paused for an instant to watch the fight he noticed that a man, coming from the opposite direction, had stopped also and stood now motionless with interest upon the sidewalk. The peculiar concentration of attention was the first thing which Adams remarked in the stranger—from his absorbed level gaze it was evident that mentally at least he had thrown himself for the moment into the thickest of the battle, and there was a flush of eager enjoyment

in the face which was partially obscured by the falling snow flakes. Then, quick as a flash of light, something pleasantly familiar in the watching figure, gripped Adams with the memory of a college battle more than fifteen years ago, and he burst out in an exclamation of pleased surprise.

"You're Arnold Kemper and I'm Roger Adams," he said, laying his hand upon the other's arm.

Kemper wheeled about immediately, while the smile of placid amusement in his face broadened into a laugh of delighted recognition.

"Well, by Jove, it's great!" he responded, and the heartiness of his handshake sent a tingling sensation through Adams' arm. "I don't know when I've been so pleased for years. Been to luncheon?"

"I've just had it," laughed Adams, remembering that fifteen years ago, when he last saw him, Kemper had extended a similar invitation with the same grasp of hearty good fellowship. Was it possible that the man had really kept his college memories alive? he wondered in a daze of admiration, or had he himself merely awakened by his reappearance a train of associations which had lain undisturbed since their last parting. Let it be as it might, Adams felt that the encounter was of the pleasantest.

"I'm driven like a slave back to office drudgery," he added, "and I'm half inclined to envy you your freedom and your automobiles."

Kemper's eyes shot back an intimate curiosity. "So you're editor of *The International Review*, I hear," he said. "Do you know I've had it in my mind for years to look you up, but there's such a confounded temptation to let things drift, you know."

"I know," rejoined Adams, smiling. "I've drifted with them."

"Well, I'm jolly glad that you've drifted my way at last. So you've been to luncheon, have you?" Kemper enquired again, as he unfastened a button of his overcoat and drew out his watch. "I wish you hadn't—I've promised to meet a man at the club and it's past the hour. I say, look here," he added hastily as he was about to hurry off, "I've some rather decent rooms of my own now where I sometimes manage to get a quiet morsel. Will you come to dine to-morrow at half-past seven, sharp?"

It took Adams hardly an instant to consider and accept the invitation. Though he rarely dined out he felt a positive pleasure at the thought, and when, a minute later, he walked on again, repeating the number of the address which the other had pressed upon him, he found that Kemper's greeting had left a trail of cheerfulness which lingered for at least a half hour after the man himself had gone on his genial way. If, as Gerty Bridewell had once declared in a fit of exasperation, "Arnold Kemper consisted of a surface," he managed at least to present those mystifying ripples of personality which suggest to the imagination depths of pleasantness as yet undiscovered. Adams had lived to his present age by the help of few illusions —and he realised even now that the thing he liked in Kemper was an effect of manner which implied an impossible subtlety—that the power one saw in the man was produced simply by some trick of pose, by a frankness so big that one felt intuitively there must be still bigger qualities behind it. Whether it was all a bluster of affectation Adams had never

as yet decided in his own mind, but there were moments when, in listening to stories of the masculine freedom in which Kemper lived, he felt inclined to acknowledge that the force, whatever it was, had spent itself in wind. In a profession the man would inevitably have become a figure, he thought now with a touch of friendly humor—in law or medicine he would have gone in for the invincible "grand style," and the picturesqueness of his person would have served to swell the number of his clients. It was a shabby turn of fortune, Adams admitted, which in supplying Kemper with a too liberal bank account, had made of him at the same time a driver of racing motor cars instead of the ornament of a more distinguished field. There were compensations doubtless, and he wondered if in this instance they had centred in the fascinations of an operatic Juliet?

Upon reaching his office he found that he was late for an interview he had appointed with a famous Russian revolutionist, who had promised him an article for the *Review*. It was the time of the month when they were making up the forthcoming number, and he was kept late over a discussion of the leading paper, which, owing to the sudden death of a literary personage of distinction, he had been compelled to replace at the last moment.

His office was a small, dingy room on the eighth floor of a building in Union Square, and his privacy was guarded by the desks of his secretaries placed directly beyond the threshold. These assistants were young men of considerable promise, he liked to think—college graduates and temperamental hero-worshippers, who adored him with an ardour which

he found at once disconcerting and ridiculous. He had been used, however, to so little personal appreciation in his life that he had grown of late to look forward, with pathetic eagerness, to the hearty morning greeting of his fellow-workers—for one of whom, a fresh-coloured youth named Baldwin, he had come to cherish a positive affection. It was stimulating to feel that somewhere he counted for something in his bodily presence—even though the scene of his importance was confined to the little smoke-stained office among the chimney pots.

When, at the end of the day, he came out into the street again and crossed to Fifth Avenue for his accustomed walk, he found that the snow had ceased to fall, though a bitter wind was scattering the heavy drifts in a succession of miniature blizzards. After the heated office the tempestuous gale struck agreeably upon his face, and his mind, which he had kept closely upon his work until the hour of release, began almost with difficulty to detach itself from the fortunes of the *Review*. In the effort to compel rather than seek distraction, he put his imagination idly on the scent of the people in the street—ran down in fancy the history of a woman in a purple velvet gown and a bedraggled petticoat, catalogued an athletic young Englishman who tugged at his heels a reluctant bulldog, and wove a tragic romance around a pretty girl in a shabby coat who stood in a staring ecstasy before a window filled with imitation jewels. Then two men, smoking cigars, came up suddenly behind him and he amused himself with guessing at the brand of the tobacco, which had a remarkably fragrant aroma.

"The only thing I know against her," said one of the men with a laugh as he went by, "is that she dines alone with Brady. If you see nothing in that beyond the simple act of dining——"

Reaching a corner they turned off abruptly down a cross street, and the rest of the sentence passed with the speaker into an obscurity of fog. For an instant it did not occur to Adams to connect the phrase with an allusion to his wife; then as he repeated it mechanically in his thoughts, there sprang upon him, like some sinister outward visitation, an indefinable horror—a presentiment which he dared not whisper even to himself. Pshaw! there were, perhaps, a dozen women who dined with Brady, he insisted reassuringly, and for the matter of that, there were probably a dozen Bradys. The name was common enough, and the only decent thing to do was to get rid of the suspicion and to apologise to Connie in his thoughts. To impute a low motive to a simple action had always seemed to him the vulgarity of littleness, and littleness in a man he had come to look upon as a kind of passive vice. So until the event proved the necessity of action, he was determined that there should be no "black bats" among his thoughts. Had he loved Connie there might have been perhaps more passion and less conscience in his treatment of the situation, but the humour of the philosopher had for many years replaced in his nature the ardour of the lover. What he gave to her was the inflexible code of honour which he observed in his association with his own sex.

At Fortieth Street he was about to turn back again when he was arrested by the sound of his own name

called by a passing voice, and looking up he saw Perry Bridewell spring from a cab which had hastily driven up to the sidewalk.

"Wait a bit, will you, Adams?" said Perry, waving one heavily gloved hand while he reached up with the other to pay the driver. "You're the very man I'm after," he added an instant later as he turned from the curbing, "so if you don't mind I'll walk a couple of blocks in your direction. I'd just got into my dinner clothes," he explained, fastening his fur-lined overcoat more snugly across his chest, "when I found that Miss Wilde was going down alone to Gramercy Park. That's where I've come from, and now I'm rushing back to keep an engagement Gerty has made for dinner. I'll be hanged if I know where she's taking me—it's all one to me, half the time I forget to ask whose house we're going to until I bolt into the drawing-room. Beastly life, this everlasting eating in other people's houses."

His tone was one of amiable discontentment, but there was a look of positive annoyance upon his handsome face, and he turned presently to regard his companion with an enquiry which might have been darkly furtive had not the luminous publicity in which he moved rendered the smallest of his mental processes so brilliantly overt. It was immediately plain to Adams that the jerky sentences were shot out at random in order that Perry's slow mind might gain a larger space in which to grope for the word he really wanted. There was something evidently behind it all, and until the situation should disclose itself they walked on in an embarrassed and waiting silence. In his top hat and his mink-lined

overcoat Perry presented an ample dignity which his companion found almost overpowering in its male magnificence. That hesitation should manifest itself amid such a pageantry of personality reminded Adams of the beggars in the old nursery rhyme who had come to town sporting velvet gowns. Everything about Perry Bridewell was built on so opulent a scale that in thinking of him one found oneself using almost unconsciously a Romanesque and florid diction.

"There is something you'd like to say to me," suggested Adams presently. "I'm in no hurry, of course, but isn't this as good a time as any other?"

"By Jove, that's just what I was thinking," returned Perry, with a burst of confidence, "but it isn't really anything, you know—that is, I mean, it isn't anything that—that's real business."

A pretty woman passed suddenly under the electric light, and even in his embarrassment, which was great, he followed her with the animated glance which he instinctively devoted to vanishing feminine beauty.

"Thank God, there's no real business between us," retorted Adams, "and that's why it's a rest to spend a half-hour with you—because you don't know a piece of literature from a publisher's advertisement."

"We're such old friends, you know," pursued Perry, forgetting the moment which he had wasted upon the pretty woman, "that when there's a thing on my mind I feel—well, I feel a—a deuced queer fish not to tell you."

Adams laughed good naturedly.

"For heaven's sake don't remain long in a fishy

sensation," he rejoined. "Let's have it out and over. By the way, may I ask if it concerns you or me?"

Perry shook his head as he tugged nervously at his fair moustache. "Look here, old man," he said at last, "I know, of course, that Mrs. Adams is as innocent as a baby—Gerty's just like her and there are plenty of women made that way. It's the men who are such confounded brutes," he commented with pensive morality.

"Oh, is that it?" responded Adams, and he turned upon the other a look that was coolly interrogative. "Come, now, we'll take it quietly. You're one of the best friends I have, and I want to know what they're saying about my wife."

"It's that damned Brady!" exclaimed Perry, while he felt for his handkerchief, and blew his nose with violence.

"All right—it's that damned Brady?" repeated Adams.

"If I didn't think more of you than of any man on earth I'd be shot before I'd tell you," protested Perry, and added with a desperate rush under fire. "He had too much champagne last night—though, as for that matter, I've seen him upset by a cocktail—and afterward at billiards he told Skinker that—that Mrs. Adams—you understand, old chap, it's all his rot—was going to supper alone with him to-night—in his rooms after the opera. Of course he was drunk and I wouldn't bet a cent on his word even when he's sober. He's the kind of fool that tells of his conquests at the club," he wound up with scathing contempt.

For a moment Adams, looking away from him,

stared silently into a shop window before which he stood—intent apparently upon the varied display of antique silver. Then he turned squarely to Perry Bridewell and broke into a short, hard laugh.

"Well, Brady lied," he said. "I promised Mrs. Adams that I would bring her home from the opera." It was no hesitation in his own voice, but the joyful relief which shone at him from Perry's face that brought him suddenly to a stop. "You were a first-rate fellow to come to me," he went on more quietly. "Of course, you know, our Western conventions are much more elastic than your New York ones. All the same——"

"I merely wanted to let her know the kind of man he is," explained Perry. "What do women understand about the men they meet—why, we all look pretty much alike upon the surface." Then his righteous anger got the better of his philosophy and he broke out in a heartfelt oath. "Damn him! I'd like to thrash him clean out of his skin!"

"I am glad you told me," was all Adams said, but there was a reserved strength in his voice which made the explosive violence of the other sound the merest bravado. As he spoke the light flashed in his face, and Perry saw that it was the face of an old and a tired man. There was a shrinking in his eyes as of one who has stumbled unexpectedly upon a revolting sight.

Of the many and varied emotions which had entered Perry's life, the cleanest, perhaps, was his loyal regard for Roger Adams. It had begun with his college days, had strengthened with his manhood, and had lasted, in spite of the amiable contempt

in which he held all literature, with a constancy which had certainly not belonged to his affairs with representatives of the opposite sex. Now as he looked at Adams' haggard face under the electric light, he felt the tugging of a sympathy so strong that it seemed to hurt him somewhere in his expansive chest.

"Look here, old chap, come and dine with me at Sherry's," he burst out, "and I'll telephone Gerty that I've thrown over that beastly dinner."

To offer something to eat to the afflicted was the solitary form in which consolation appeared to him invested with solidity; and so earnest was the generous impulse by which he now felt himself to be prompted, that before Adams could reply to the invitation he had begun already to run over mentally the courses he was prepared to order. For a colossal, a consolatory, an unforgettable dinner he was determined that it should be—such a dinner as he permitted himself only upon the rare occasions when one of his intimate friends had lost heavily in stocks or been abandoned by his wife. "Come to Sherry's," he urged again, halting in the ecstatic working of his mind, "and I promise you that we will make an evening."

But the sly incarnate devil which lurked in Adams in the form of an ironic spirit asserted itself with an explosion which shook the plethoric gravity with which Perry contemplated an orgy of indigestion. The universal scheme appeared planned to fulfil the law of a Titanic humour, and his own credulity and Connie's indiscretions showed suddenly to Adams as mere mote-like jests which circled in a general convulsion of Nature's irony.

"Well, you are a capital fellow," he stammered, after a moment, while the spasm of his unholy laughter rocked him from head to foot. "I—I'd like it of all things—but I can't. The fact is it is all so funny—the whole business of life."

Even as he uttered the words he realised that to Perry they would convey an infamous lightness, but at the thought his hysterical humour redoubled in its energy. It was as if he stood outside—afar off—and watched as a god the little tangled eccentricities of earth. And they *were* little, even though Perry should continue to regard the situation with such large magnificence.

By the time, however, that he had parted from Perry Bridewell and turned in at his own door, the gravity of the occasion had grown almost oppressive in his reflections. Connie had gone an hour before—he was too late to have detained her upon a pretext—and while sitting speechless before the dinner he could not eat—his heated imagination wove visions of horror in which his wife was entangled as a fly in a spider's web. What if Connie were really possessed by the influence of some drug which rendered her incapable of willing rationally? What if he missed her at the entrance to the opera? Or what if—most desperate supposition—she should, in the event of his finding her, refuse to accept his manufactured excuse to recall her home? She was capable, he knew, of any recklessness, but he had never for an instant conceived her as walking open eyed into dishonour, and he felt again the awful, if partly comforting conviction that she was not herself—that an infernal drug was working in her

and bending her to some particular uses of the devil. Why had she wasted her beauty and even her life? he wondered bitterly—and did the moment's mad exhilaration compensate for the slow deliberate eating away of her moral consciousness? He recalled again the violent flutter of her manner, the excitement as of intoxication in her voice, the yellow tinge which had crept gradually over the ivory of her skin; her spasmodic movements and the ineffectual lies which deluded neither of them for an instant. The tragedy of life rose before him as vividly as the humour of it had done an hour ago—a tragedy which was hideous because it was ignoble, in which there was neither the beauty of resignation nor the sublimity of defiance. Had there been the least—even the smallest redeeming honesty in the situation he felt that he might have faced it, if not with positive sympathy yet with a tolerant, a merciful comprehension. Love he might have understood—for women needed it, he knew, and he was burdened by no delusion concerning the place he occupied in Connie's horizon. But before the breathless chase of excitement in which she lived, the frenzied invocation of pleasure that filled her thoughts, he found himself groping blindly for some meaning which would explain the thing it could not justify.

The hours dragged so heavily that by ten o'clock he put on his overcoat and snow-shoes and went out again into the street. He was possessed at the moment by a growing fear of missing Connie, and as he walked toward the opera house he had sense of a premonition almost occult in power that the terrible destiny which had her in its clutch was

gathering energy for some pitiless catastrophe. With characteristic patience he searched his own conscience, the incidents of his daily life, and held himself rather than his wife to account. After all, he was the stronger of the two, and yet when had he put forth his strength or his pity on her behalf? In the closer human relations mere indifference showed suddenly as sin, and the sluggish spirit which had controlled his married life appeared in his memory as a form of moral apathy. Was a human soul so small a thing that it could perish at his side and he be none the wiser? What was his boasted intellect worth if it could paralyse the human part of him and exhaust the fount of his compassion? In his widening vision he saw that in the spirit of things humanity is one and indivisible, a single organism held together by a common pulse of life. To live or to die apart, he realised, is beyond the scope of an individual destiny, for in the eye of God each man that lives is the keeper not of his own but of his brother's soul.

The self reproach which moved in his heart impelled him so rapidly upon his way that when he reached the doors he had still an hour to wait before the opera ended. Remembering that if he were so fortunate as to find Connie he must take her home, he went to a livery stable for a carriage, and then coming back, walked nervously up and down upon the frozen pavement. His mind was divided between the fear that she might leave by another entrance—that he might miss her altogether—and the more horrible dread that in seeing her he should be unable to prevail upon her to come away. She might, he felt, demand a reason, exact from him the meaning

of his unexpected appearance; there was even a hideous possibility that she might fly into a temper.

The wind was bitter and he went into the lobby, where a few men were hurrying out to secure their carriages. Then at last came the crowd in evening dress, and it seemed to him that the acuteness of his perception was reinforced by an almost unnatural power of vision. Out of the moving throng the face of each woman stood forth distinctly as if relieved by a spectral illumination; and he saw them clearly one after one, fair or dark, plain or beautiful, until from among them there shone toward him the elaborately arranged blonde head of Connie, under a winking diamond which shed over her an unbecoming light. He had hoped to the last that she would be with several others, but he perceived when she came out at Brady's side, with her babyish chin tilted upward and her thin features working in a forced and unhealthy animation, that they were alone and would probably be alone for the remainder of the evening.

Standing beyond the entrance, and watching her unseen, while she paused for an instant in the crowded lobby, Adams felt again the strange stir of emotion he had experienced when he looked at her the evening before under the lamplight in his study. In a single vivid instant he saw her winking diamonds, her rouged cheeks, the nervous flutter that shook her fragile figure, and the consuming fire which was destroying the appealing prettiness of her face. Then he looked deeper still to the naked terrified soul of her, caught in a web from which, because of her weakness, there could be no escape.

There was no room in his heart now for any other feeling than one of agonised compassion, and as she came through the doorway he touched her arm and spoke in a voice which had the sound of a caress. "I've just had bad news, Connie, so I came to find you."

She started violently, her hand dropped from her companion's arm, and she stood trembling from head to foot like a blade of grass that is shaken by a high wind. "What do you mean? What is it?" she demanded.

After lifting his hat to Brady he had not noticed him again, and now he bent upon his wife a look of gentle, if unyielding, authority. "I'll tell you presently—in the carriage," he said, drawing her wrap more closely about her throat. "I have one waiting at the corner."

He saw her look at him in a frightened hesitation; saw, too, that even in the quiver of her alarm she had taken in the unflattering details of his appearance—his ordinary business overcoat, the blue silk muffler about his neck, and even the bespattered condition of his rubber shoes. For an instant she glanced uncertainly at Brady's immaculate evening dress showing beneath his open fur-lined overcoat, and knowing her as he did, Adams read her appreciation of the contrast as plainly as if it had been written in her face.

But he was not moved by the knowledge of her criticism, nor did it shake him in the least from that penetrating vision he had attained. The instinct for battle was alive and quick within him—if Connie was to be saved he knew that he must fight single-

handed with the powers of evil for her soul. And fight he would—it was the end for which a man was born—that he might overcome and so justify the spirit about the brute.

Her hand hung at her side, and taking it in his, he slipped it under his arm with a possessive air, while she made to Brady some hurried excuses in a trembling voice. For a moment still she hung back, but Adams drew her gently with him, and after the first few steps, she recovered herself and walked rapidly to the waiting carriage. Inside she shrank back immediately into a corner from which, when they had rolled off, she sent forth a nervous question.

"What is it? Tell me what it is?" she asked.

The tremor that shook her limbs, her utter helplessness before him, touched his heart with a compassion beside which his old emotion for her showed as a small and trivial thing. All that was divine in him awoke and responded to the horror that looked from her face, and he felt suddenly that until this instant he had never loved her. Now she was really his because now she needed him; but for him she would stand alone, deserted and afraid, in that future to which she had turned with such pitiable and childlike ignorance. She and the fight were both in his hands, and he was bracing himself to resist until the end.

"I'll tell you if you wish," he said, "but you mustn't let it give you a sleepless night."

As they turned a corner an electric light flashed into the darkness of the carriage lighting up her blonde hair and the sparkling diamonds which made her blue eyes look dull and lifeless. "It is—

is it anything about money?" she asked with a movement toward him.

"It's about nothing more important than that consummate ass you were with," he answered, laughing as he reached out and took her hand in his with a friendly pressure. "I've just found out that he's a blackguard, and I thought you were too precious to be left an instant longer in his company. We must be careful, dear," he added. "God knows I'll do my best to help you—but we must be careful."

"Oh!" she cried out sharply, in a high voice. "Oh!" and she shrank from him as if he had hurt her by his touch. It was all she said, but the word quivered in his ears with a suppressed emotion. Was it thankfulness for her escape? he wondered, or was it anger at the part that he had played?

Part II

ILLUSION

CHAPTER I

Of Pleasure as the Chief End of Man

On the morning after his meeting with Adams, Arnold Kemper awoke at three minutes of nine o'clock, and lay for exactly the three minutes that were needed to make up the hour watching the hand as it moved on the face of the bronze clock upon his mantel. The clock, like everything in his rooms, was costly, a little ornate, and suggestive of an owner whose intention aimed frankly at the original.

Lying in his large mahogany bedstead, with his body outstretched between soft yet crisply ironed linen sheets, and his head placed exactly in the centre of the pillows, he waited, yawning, until the expected hour should strike. If by an effort of will he could have put back the minute hand for another quarter of an hour he felt that it would have been pleasant to doze off again, shutting his eyes to the sunlight which streamed through the window on the Turkish rug, and inhaling agreeably the aroma of boiling coffee which reached him through the open door of his sitting-room. With the thought he closed his eyes, stretched himself again and clasped his hands sleepily above his head; then, without warning, the clock struck in a deep, bronze-like tone, and with a vigorous movement, he sprang out of bed, flung his dressing-gown across his shoulders,

and passed quickly to the cold plunge in his dressing-room. When he reappeared there was a fresh, healthy glow in his face, and the smile with which he knotted his green figured necktie before the mirror, stuck his black pearl scarf pin carefully in place, and twisted the short ends of his brown moustache, was that of a man who begins his day in a blithe and friendly humour.

In the dining-room, which opened from his sitting-room next door, his breakfast was already awaiting him, and beside his plate he found several letters and the morning papers. He read the letters first, but with a single exception they proved to be bills, and after glancing at these with a suspicious frown he tossed them aside and turned to the little square white envelope, which contained an invitation to dine from a woman whom he detested because she bored him with domestic complaints. His heavy brows gathered darkly over his impatient gray eyes, and he pushed the mail carelessly away to make room for his coffee, to which his man was adding a precise amount of cream and sugar.

"Don't let me forget to answer that, Wilkins," he said, in an annoyed tone; "the response must be sent this afternoon, too, without fail."

"I don't think you wrote the notes you spoke of yesterday, sir," observed Wilkins, with an English accent and a manner of respectful intimacy.

"Hang it all! I don't believe I did," returned Kemper, as he drew his chair up to the table and tapped his egg shell. "That comes of letting a thing you hate to do go over. I say, Wilkins, if I attempt to leave this room before I've answered

those letters, you're to restrain me by force, do you hear?"

"Yes, sir; certainly, sir," replied Wilkins, as he went out to bring in the toast.

Kemper laid his napkin across his knees, leaned comfortably back in his chair, and unfolded one of the morning papers beside his plate. As he did so he expanded his lungs with a deep breath, while his glance travelled rapidly to the column which contained the day's reports of the stock market. He knew already that the Chericoke Valley Central in which he had invested had jumped thirty points and was still advancing, but he read the printed statements with the exhaustless interest with which a lover might return to a love letter he had already learned by heart. His faith in the Chericoke Valley Central stock was strong, and he meant to keep a close grip on it for some time to come.

Turning a fresh page presently, his eyes wandered leisurely over the staring headlines, and came suddenly to a halt before a trivial item inserted among the Western news. It was a brief notice of his divorced wife's marriage, and to his amazement the announcement caused him an annoyance that was almost like the ghost of a retrospective jealousy. It was quite evident to him that he did not want her for himself, yet he suffered a positive displeasure at the thought that she should now belong to another man. After the ten years since they had separated was she still so "awfully splendid?" he wondered, had she kept her figure, which was long, athletic, with a military carriage, and did she still wear her hair in the fashion of a German omelette? "Thank

heaven I'm well out of it at any rate," he commented with feeling. "That comes of a man's marrying before he's twenty-five. He's turned cynic before he gets to forty"; and marriage appeared to him in his thoughts as a detestable and utterly boring institution, which interfered continually with a man's freedom and exacted from him a perpetual sociability. The most blissful sensation he had ever known, he told himself, was that of his recovered liberty; then his sincerity of nature compelled him to an honest contradiction—he had known one emotion more blissful still and that was the madness which had prompted him to his unfortunate marriage.

Oh, he had been very much in love without a doubt! and while he sat peacefully drinking his two cups of coffee, eating his two eggs and his four pieces of toast with orange marmalade, he remembered, with a melancholy which in no wise affected his appetite, the first occasion upon which he had kissed the woman who had been his wife. The memory of her tall, erect figure, with its dashing military carriage, aroused in him an agreeable and purely physical regret—the kind of regret which is strong enough only to sweeten the knowledge of past pleasures; and he admitted with his accustomed frankness that if he had never kissed her again he should probably have continued to regard her with a charming, if impractical, sentiment. But marriage had brushed off the bloom of that early romance; and as he recognised this, he felt a keen resentment against nature which had cheated him into believing that the illusion of love would not vanish at the first touch of reality.

He had lived upon the surface of things and the surface had contented if it had not satisfied him. It had never entered his thoughts to question if he had had from life the best that it could offer, but he had sometimes wondered, in moments of nervous exasperation against small events, why it was that there could be no end under the sun to a man's pursuit of the fugitive sensation. When he looked back now over the breathless years of his life, he saw, almost with indignation, that whatever punishment fate had held in reserve for him, the avenger had inevitably appeared in the form of his own gratified desire. He had withheld his hand from nothing; the thing that he had wanted he had taken without question—impulse and possession had flowed for him with a rhythmic regularity of movement—and yet in glancing back he could place his finger upon no past events and say of them "this brought me happiness—and this—and this." In retrospect his pleasures showed cheap and threadbare—woven of perishable colours, of lost illusions—and he felt suddenly that he had been cheated into a false valuation of life, that he had been deluded into a childish yet irretrievable error.

As he sat there over his paper, he remembered his impatient early love, his ecstatic marriage, and then the long years during which he had lived, as he put it to himself, in a "mortal funk" of the divorce court. Not moral obligation, but social cowardice, he admitted, had held him in a bondage from which his wife had at last liberated him by a single blow. Well, it was all over! he heaved a sigh of relief, emptied his coffee cup, and dismissed the

subject, with its oppressive train of associations, from his mind.

But his temperamental blitheness had suffered in the chill of recollection, and he frowned down upon the staring headlines which ornamented the open page before him. His face, which recorded unerringly the slightest emotional change through which he passed, grew suddenly heavy and was over clouded by a momentary fit of gloom. He had not seen, had hardly thought of his former wife, once in the ten years since their separation, yet he found almost to his annoyance that the mere printed letters of her name reinvoked her image from the darkness in which his sentimental skeletons were laid. Two brief lines in a newspaper sufficed to produce her as an important factor in his present life.

And despite this she was nothing to him, had no proper business in his mind. He tried to think of the other women whom he had loved and remembered, or of the more numerous ones still whom he had loved only to forget. Well, he had lived a man's life, and the deuce of it was that women should have come into it at all. He had never wanted sentiment in the abstract, he told himself half angrily; he was bored to death by the deadly routine of what in his own mind he alluded to as "the business of love." It had always come to him without his sanction—even against his will, and he had never failed to combat the feeling with shallow cynicism, to exhaust it speedily in racing motors. There was no satisfaction in sentiment, of this he was quite convinced; and he remembered the voice of Madame Alta, with her peculiar high note of piercing sweetness, which

entered like wine and honey into his blood. The hold she still kept upon his senses through his memory was strengthened by the knowledge which fretted him to the admission that she had wearied first—that while her fascination was still potent to work its spell upon him, she had fled in a half lyric, half devilish pursuit of the flesh she worshipped. To live life thoroughly, to get out of it all that it contained of pleasure or of experience, this was the germ of his applied philosophy; and it was only by some fortunate mental power of selection, some instinctive sense for comeliness, for a well-ordered, healthful physical existence, which had left him at the end of his forty years of pleasure with a perfectly sound and active mind and body. He himself was accustomed to declare that though he had lived gayly, he had lived decently, too, and he was even inclined at times to flatter his vanity rather upon the things which he had left undone than upon those more evident achievements which had stamped him to his social world. A religious instinct, which was hardly definite enough for a conviction, still survived in him, and it was entirely characteristic of the man that he should find cause for shame, not congratulation, in his old relations with Madame Alta.

The last remaining bit of toast and marmalade had vanished from his plate, and as he never allowed himself more than his usual number of slices, he carefully brushed the crumbs from his coat, and pushing back his chair, rose from the table. The movement, slight as it was, served to dispel his passing dejection, and as he gathered up his papers and passed into the adjoining sitting-room, he smiled

at Wilkins with such genial brightness that the man was almost deluded into attributing the changed atmosphere to his own personal attentions instead of to the agreeable sensation following upon digestion. When he left the dining-room Kemper was already humming a little Italian air, and it was not until he was seated, with his cigar, in an easy chair upon his hearthrug, that he suddenly recognised the music as a favourite aria of Madame Alta's. He had heard her sing it a hundred times, and he recalled now that she had a trick of throwing her head back as the notes issued from her round, white throat, until her beautiful, though coarsened face, was seen in an admirable foreshortening, while her eyes were shadowed by her drooping lids, which were faintly tinted to look like rose-leaves. With the memory his expression was again overcast. Then a pleased smile chased the heaviness from his eyes, for he remembered suddenly that he held a firm grip on the promising Chericoke Valley Central stock. He lighted his cigar, tossed the match into the empty fireplace, and pushing the papers from his knees, relapsed for twenty minutes into an agreeable vacancy of mind.

The room in which he sat was essentially a man's room, furnished for comfort rather than for beauty, and one saw in it an unconscious striving after large effects, a disdain of useless bric-a-brac as of small decorations. On the mantel the solitary ornament was an exquisite bronze figure of a wrestler at the triumphant instant when he subdues his opponent, a spirited and virile study of the nude male figure, and just above it hung a portrait in oils of Madame Alta, painted in a large black hat with a falling feather

which shadowed the golden aureole of her hair. Kemper seldom looked at the picture, and when he did so it was with the casual glance he bestowed upon a piece of household furniture; his emotion had been so bound up with the concrete fact of a fleshly presence that in the continued absence of the prima donna he had found it difficult even to realise the condition of her unchanged existence. In his whole life the past had never engrossed him to the immediate exclusion of the present.

When he had finished his cigar, he rose slowly to his feet, shook himself with an energetic movement as if to settle his body more comfortably in his clothes, and went into the hall to put on his overcoat before going out. Here he was overtaken by a remonstrance from Wilkins.

"You aren't going to the office, I hope, sir, until you've written those notes?"

Kemper stared at him silently an instant, one arm still in the sleeve of the overcoat he was putting on.

"Oh, I say, Wilkins, I'll do them at the club," he replied at last.

Wilkins shook his head with decision written in every line of his smooth-shaven English profile. He was faithful, he was even affectionate, but he had been in Kemper's service for fifteen years and he knew his man.

"You'd better get them off now, sir," he urged in a persuasive voice, "it won't take you a minute, and unless I post them myself, they are like to lie over."

"Well, I suppose you'll have your way with me, Wilkins," remarked Kemper, as he withdrew his

arm from his overcoat, which his servant promptly took from him. "Most people do, you know." Then he turned back into his sitting-room and placing himself at his desk, took up his pen and accepted three invitations out of the round dozen he had to answer. This accomplished, the discreet Wilkins gave him his hat and coat and permitted him to depart rapidly upon his way.

By eleven o'clock he was due at the office of the Confidential Life Insurance Company, of which he was one of the directors, and as he walked toward Broadway with his brisk and energetic step, he kept his mind closely upon the business affairs which were immediately before him. This peculiar ability to concentrate his whole being upon a single instant, to apply himself with enthusiasm to the thing beneath his eyes, was the quality of all others which had worked most not only for his present worldly success, but for his personal happiness as well. When he came out of his rooms the brief despondency of the morning had vanished as utterly as if it had never been, and until his wife's name stared at him anew from a printed page, it was hardly probable that she would occur again to his thoughts. A feeling of peace, of perfect charity pervaded his breast, and had he been asked on the spot for an expression of his religious creed, he would, perhaps, have answered without hesitation, "to live in pleasure and let live with pleasantness." Naturally of a quick and humane heart there were moments when he felt an urgent desire to give out happiness, to add his proper share to the general sum of earthly contentment. He was a man, in fact, who might be infalli-

bly counted on for the "generous thing," provided always that the "generous thing" was also the thing which he found it agreeable to perform. In ancient Rome he would have been, without doubt, a popular politician, in Greece a Cyrenaic philosopher, in the Middle Ages a churchman conspicuous for his purple, and during the American Revolution a believer in the cause that wore the most gold lace. It was not that he was lacking in patriotism, but that his patriotism responded best to a spectacular appeal.

At the luncheon hour, when he came out of his office to go to his club, he remembered that he had neglected to send roses to a woman with whom he had dined the week before she went to a hospital for a serious operation, and though the stop delayed his luncheon for half an hour, he left his car at the corner of Twenty-third Street to leave an order with his florist. Then, after a simple meal, he put in a pleasant hour at the club, during which he managed to interest a great occulist in a chap he knew who was threatened with blindness but too poor to pay for the operation necessary to his recovery. It was this conversation that recalled to him a friend who was ill with pneumonia in chambers just around the block, and he rushed off to enquire after him, before he attended to the unpacking of a new French motor car, and hurried to keep an engagement he had made with Gerty Bridewell to call on Laura Wilde. A week ago, when the engagement was made, he had been urgent with Gerty about going, but now that the hour drew near he began to feel the necessity of the visit to be a bore. Like all of his sensations, the impression Laura had made upon

him had been vivid but easily effaced, and he was almost surprised at the disappointment he felt when, upon reaching the house, he found that she was not at home.

"It's too hard," commented Gerty, standing upon the front steps and glancing wistfully up at him from under the white feathers in her hat, "but there's no help for it unless you care to call on Uncle Percival."

"Uncle Percival?" he repeated, impatiently twirling his walking stick; "who's he?"

"He's a curiosity."

"What kind of curiosity? A live one?"

She nodded. "The kind of curiosity that plays a flute."

He began his descent of the steps, not replying until he stood with her upon the sidewalk before her carriage. "I might have put up with a poet," he remarked with his foreign shrug, "but I'm compelled to draw the line before a piper."

"Well, I thought you would," confessed Gerty, "or I shouldn't have suggested it."

"It seems, by the way, to be a family that runs to talent," he laughed, while she paused a moment before entering her carriage.

"I don't know that Uncle Percival is exactly a person of talent," she observed, "he plays very badly, I believe. Can't I drop you somewhere? Do let me."

He shook his head with a quizzical humour. "To tell the truth horses make me nervous," he returned. "I'm afraid of them—You never know what intentions they have in mind. No, I'll walk, thank you." His

gaze was on her and she saw his eyes flash with admiration of her beauty.

"Oh, your dreadful, soulless automobiles!" she exclaimed, with disgust. "By the way, Laura hates them—she says they have the devil's energy without his intellect."

He laughed indifferently. "Does she? I'll teach her better."

Gerty looked back to protest as she stepped into her carriage. "But you'll never have a chance," she said.

"I'll make one," he persisted, gayly.

From the midst of her fur rugs she leaned out with a provoking little laugh, while he watched her green eyes narrow in an arch and fascinating merriment. "What would you say if I told you she was at home all the time?" she asked. Then before he could remonstrate or reply, she rolled off leaving him transfixed and questioning upon the sidewalk.

Was Laura Wilde really at home? The suspicion piqued him into a curiosity he could not satisfy, and because he could not satisfy it he found himself dwelling with a reawakened interest upon the woman who had avoided him. If she had in truth refused to receive his visit it could mean only that she entertained a dislike for his presence, and for a dislike so evident there must be surely some foundation either in fact or in intuition. No woman, so far as he could remember—and so unusual an occurence would not easily have slipped his memory—had ever begun his acquaintance with a distinctly expressed aversion, and the very strangeness of the experience was not without attraction for his eager

and dominant temperament. What a queer little oddity she was, he thought as he glanced up at the grave old house before turning rapidly away—as light and sensitive as thistle-down, as vivid as flame. He tried to recall her delicately distinguished figure and profound dark eyes, but her charming smile seemed to come between him and her features, and her face was obscured for him in a mysterious radiance. Her features taken in themselves were plain, he supposed, certainly they were not beautiful, yet of her whole appearance his memory held only the fervent charm of her expression. It was a face with a soul in it, he thought—all the mystery of flame and of shadow was in her smile, so what mattered the mere surface modelling or the tinting of the skin which was less ivory than pale amber. An hour ago he had been absolutely indifferent, almost forgetful of her existence, but his vanity if not his heart was stung now into an emotion which had in it something of the primitive barbarian ardour of pursuit. He cared nothing—less than nothing—for Laura Wilde herself, yet it was not in his nature that he should suffer in silence before a sudden and unreasonable affront.

Some hours later, when he sat with Adams at dinner, the subject occurred to him again, and he broke in upon a discussion of the varied fortunes of their fellow classmen to allude directly to the cause of his inquietude.

"By the way, I had the pleasure of meeting a protegée of yours the other afternoon," he said.

Adams met the remark with his whimsical laugh. "Of mine? Thank heaven I haven't any," he

retorted, "but I suppose you mean young Trent, who has just come up from Virginia."

"I've heard something of him from Mrs. Bridewell, I believe," answered Kemper across the centrepiece of red carnations, "but I haven't met him as yet—I was thinking of Miss Wilde when I spoke. I wish you'd try this sherry—it's really first rate—I brought it over myself."

When Wilkins had filled his glass, Adams lifted it against the light and looked at the colour of the wine a moment before drinking. "First rate—I should say so. It's exquisite," he observed as he touched it to his lips in answer to Kemper's glance of enquiry. "Yes, she's done some rather fine things," he resumed presently, returning to the subject of Laura, "but she'll hardly make a popular appeal, I fancy, unless she turns her talent to patriotic airs. The only poetry we tolerate to-day is the poetry that serves some definite material purpose—it must either send us into battle or set us to building churches. The simple spirit of contemplation we've come to regard as a pauperising habit and it puts us out of patience. Great poetry grows out of quiet and nobody is quiet any longer—a thought no sooner creeps into our head than we begin to talk about it at the top of our voice."

The branched candlestick at the end of the table shed a glimmering, pearly light upon his face, and Kemper, as he watched him critically, was struck suddenly by the fact that Adams was no longer young. He could not be over forty, yet his features had the drawn and pallid look of a man who has known, not only ill health, but the shock of emotional catas-

trophes. Physically he appeared worn to the point of exhaustion, but if there was pathos in the slight, elastic figure, there was also an impression of power for which the other found it impossible to account. By mere bodily force Kemper could have thrown Adams from the window with one hand, he realised with a perfectly amiable self-congratulation —yet in Adams' presence he invariably felt himself to be the weaker man, and the attitude he unconsciously adopted showed an almost boyish recognition of a superior intelligence. Something in Roger Adams—a quality which was neither brute strength nor imperious personality—exerted a power which Kemper generously admitted to be greater even than these. Nothing in the man was conspicuous—he exercised no dominant magnetism—but the invisible spirit which controlled his life, controlled also, in a measure, the thoughts of those who came directly beneath his influence. Was it true, Kemper now wondered, as Perry Bridewell had once declared with unspeakable mirth, that the thing he liked in Adams was, after all, merely simple goodness in a manifest form? Goodness in a masculine personality had always appeared to Kemper to be ridiculously out of place—a masquerading feminised virtue—but at this instant as he drank to Adams' health across the carnations, he felt again the power of an attraction which possessed a sweetness that made his past "wine and honey" sicken in his memory. "Is it possible that what I admire in this man is the quality I have laughed at all my life?" he found himself asking suddenly; and the power of self-restraint, the grace of denial, the strength which could do without,

though it could not take the thing it wanted, the quietness of sacrifice, the sweetened humour that is learned only in sorrow—these showed to him at the moment in a singularly new and vivid light. "I know nothing of his life except that he has had courage," he thought again, "yet because of this one thing—and because, too, of a quality which I recognise, though I cannot name it, I would trust him sooner than any man or woman whom I know—sooner, by Jove, than I would trust myself." Among his many generous traits was the ability to appreciate keenly where he could not follow, to apprehend almost instinctively the finer attributes of the spirit, and though he himself preferred the pleasures of the senses to the vaguer comforts of philosophy, he was not without a profound admiration for the man who, as he believed, had deliberately chosen to forfeit the joy of life. Roger Adams impressed him to-night as a peculiarly happy man—not with the hectic happiness he himself had sought—but with a secure, a reposeful, an indestructible possession—the happiness which comes not through the illusion of desire, but which is bound up in the peace of an eternal reconciliation. The man beyond the carnations, he knew by an intuition surer than knowledge, had never even for an hour dallied in the primrose path where his own pursuit of delight had begun and ended—he could not imagine Adams' control yielding to a fleeting impulse of passion—yet had not the very power he recognised come to his friend in the stony places through which he had been constrained to walk with God? Sitting there Kemper was brought suddenly for the first time in his life

face to face with the profoundest truth that lies hidden in the deeps of knowledge—that renunciation may become the richest experience in the consciousness of man; that to renounce for the sake of goodness is not merely to refrain from sin but to achieve virtue; and that he who gives up his happiness and is still happy has gained not only the beauty of his forfeited joys, but has added to his own a strength that is equal to the strength of his unfulfilled desire. Kemper had always believed himself strong because he had attained, yet he knew now that Adams was stronger than he inasmuch as he had gone without for the sake of his own soul.

From his reflections, which were dimly like these, Kemper came back abruptly to his memory of Laura. "Do you know," he said, speaking to himself rather than to his companion, "that she really interests me very much indeed."

"Well, she is interesting," laughed Adams, "in spite of the fact that Perry finds her rather dull. He complains that she doesn't talk like a book, which is a trifle odd when you consider that he has never read one."

"What I like about her is that she's different," said Kemper. "She is, isn't she?"

"Different from other people? Yes, I dare say she is, but all the Wildes are that, you know. She comes of an eccentric stock. Did you ever happen to meet her aunt, Mrs. Payne?"

Kemper nodded as he leaned forward to make a division in the centre of the intervening carnations, "The old lady who looks like a chorus girl in her dotage? Yes, I've had the pleasure and I found her

decidedly better than she looked. Her husband, by the way, is a great old chap, isn't he? He held the biggest share in iron last spring and I guess he has made a pretty figure."

"He's a philosopher who got into the stock market by mistake," observed Adams. "I believe he would have been perfectly happy if he could have owned a single farm, a cow or two and a pair of horses to his plough, but he's condemned to bear the uncongenial weight of millions, and I hear that he has even to give his charities in secret. I never look at him that I don't think of Marcus Aurelius oppressed by the burden of the whole Roman Empire."

Kemper was peeling a pear, which he had taken from a dish upon the table, and he laid down his knife for a moment to push aside his cup of coffee.

"Has he any children?" he asked abruptly.

"Two—both sons and gay young birds, I'm told."

"Then Miss Wilde will hardly come in for a share of the burden?"

"Hardly. The sons will probably dissipate a good half of it before it reaches them."

"It's a pity," said Kemper thoughtfully; and having finished his pear, he dipped his fingers in his finger bowl, moistened his short moustache, and turned to take a cigar from the little silver tray which Wilkins held before him. "Do you know I can't imagine a greater happiness than the quick accumulation of wealth," he observed in his hearty voice.

Adams laughed aloud with a merriment that was almost boyish. "Well, I dare say you come in for

your part of it," he returned, while he flicked the ashes from his cigar.

"I?" Kemper shook his head without a smile. "Oh, I accumulate nothing except habits. I make and I spend—I win and I lose—and on my word I'm no richer to-day than I was ten years ago. I've made a fortune in a day," he added regretfully, "to lose it in an hour."

A glow had sprung to his face, and as he spoke he leaned his elbow on the table, and closing his eyes inhaled the delicious aroma of his cigar. Finance interested him always—wealth in its material mass had a tremendous attraction for him, and he loved not only the sound of figures but the clink of coin. Though he was a lavish liver when it suited his impulses, the modern regard for money as a concrete possession—a personal distinction—was strong in his blood; but here, as in other ways, he was redeemed from positive vulgarity by the very candour with which he confessed his weakness. He drifted presently into stocks, and they sat talking until eleven o'clock, when Adams, after glancing in surprise at the hour, remarked, with a laugh, that he had forgotten he no longer boasted the constitution of his college days. It had been a pleasant evening to both, and as Kemper threw off his coat a little later, he found himself reflecting, not without wonder, that the quiet—the absolute inaction of the last few hours had refreshed rather than bored him. On the whole he was inclined to admit that he liked Adams better than any man he knew—liked his assured self-possession, his indifference to small creature comforts; liked, too, the quiet tolerance

which characterised his human relations—and he impulsively determined that he would arrange to see him often during the next few years. It was time now, he concluded with an admirable midnight resolution, while he struggled in exasperation to unfasten his collar, that he himself should begin to pay a due regard to his health—to restrict his indulgences; and he drew an agreeable picture of the consolation that Adams' friendship might afford to an abstemious man of middle age. "By Jove—confound this button—there, I've twisted it like the deuce—by Jove, it is refreshing to be thrown with a chap who is interested in something besides women and horses—who finds other objects—or subjects if you choose—suffice for his entertainment." For the first time in his life he found himself wishing regretfully that at least a share of his own enjoyments had assumed a character which belonged less exclusively to the external world. The joy in knowledge, the delight in contemplation were unknown to him, though he was dimly aware that for another man they might prove to be an unfailing, a permanent solace. But his virtues were the magnificent virtues of the animal, and amid the many warring impulses of the body there was but little room for a more gracious development of the soul. He had lived for the world and the world had repaid him as she repays all her lovers with the fruit which is rarely bitter before the fortieth year.

Adams, meanwhile, had walked rapidly home, thinking with enthusiasm that Kemper was a thoroughly good fellow. His social pleasures were few, and he had enjoyed the fine wine and the choice

cigars as a man enjoys a taste for luxury which he seldom gratifies. He had expected to find Connie still out, but to his surprise there was a sound on the staircase as he entered the front door, and she came rapidly to meet him, her blonde hair hanging upon her shoulders and the soiled white silk dressing-gown she wore trailing on the carpeted steps behind her.

"I was all alone and I've been so frightened," she said with a sob.

He took her hand, which felt dead and cold, and grasped it warmly while he turned to fasten the outer door.

"Why, I thought you were at the theatre," he responded. "I've been to dine with Kemper, but heaven knows I'd have stayed at home if you'd told me you meant to keep me company."

A shudder ran through her, and he saw when he turned to look at her, that her face was pinched and blue as if from cold. In her white gown, under her tangled fair hair, she had a ghastly look like one just awakened from a fearful dream. But she was very little—so little in her terror and her blighted prettiness that his heart contracted as it would have done at the sight of a suffering child.

"I say, little girl, what is it all about?" he asked gently, and as she swayed unsteadily, he put his arm around her and drew her against his side. "Wait a minute while I turn out the light," he added cheerfully, pressing the electric button with his free hand. Then holding her closer in a steadying support, they ascended together the darkened staircase.

"I went to the theatre, but I was so ill I couldn't stay," she said, and he felt the heavy breaths that laboured through the thin figure within his arm. "Oh, I am in agony—in agony and I am so afraid."

She began crying in loud, uncontrollable sobs as a child cries when it is hurt, protesting that she was afraid—that she was fearfully afraid. He felt her terror struggling like a live thing within her—like an imprisoned animal that could not find an escape into the light. Her hysteria was almost akin to madness, and the form it took was one of a blind presentiment of evil—as if she felt always in the air about her the presence of an invisible, unspeakable horror. Half dragging, half carrying her, he crossed the hall to her room, and laid her upon the bed, which was tumbled as if she had lain tossing wildly there for hours. Every electric jet was blazing high, and Connie's evening clothes were lying in a huddled heap upon the floor. There was a sickening smell of perfume in the room, and he saw that she had broken a bottle of extract and spilled its contents upon the carpet.

"Tell me what it is—tell me, Connie," he commanded, rather than pleaded, sitting beside the bed and laying his hand upon her shuddering body.

"It is nothing—but it is everything," she gasped, clutching his hand with fingers which were cold and moist. "I am not in pain—at least not physically, but I feel—I believe—I know that I am going mad. I see horrible things and I can't keep them away—I can't—I can't. They come in flashes—in coloured flashes, all red and green, and there is

something dreadful about to happen to me. Oh, don't let it, don't let it!"

She clung to him, shuddering, sobbing, imploring, moaning again that she was afraid, beseeching him to keep off the horror—not to let it come any nearer—not to let it look her in the eyes. The spasm ended at last in a wild burst of tears, while she shrieked out frantically in a terror that was pitiable and abject. Her hallucinations seemed to have got entirely beyond the control of reason, and as she crouched, with drawn up knees and quivering arms, among the pillows she looked like some small helpless, distracted mortal in the grasp of the avenging furies. At the moment she seemed to him less his wife than his child.

"Listen to me, Connie," he said presently in a voice whose quiet authority silenced for an instant her despairing moans. "You haven't a trouble on earth that I am not willing to share and I am sharing this—I have made it mine this very minute. Whatever there is to face, I'll face it for you, so get this into your head and go to sleep. Nothing can get to you—neither man nor devil—until it has first passed by me. There, now—don't sob so; don't, you'll hurt yourself. There's nothing to cry about—it's all a false alarm."

"I'm so afraid," she repeated over and over again, as she clung to him. "Promise not to leave me an instant—not to take your hands off of me. If I am left alone again I shall die of fear."

"You shall not be alone, I swear it," he answered with cheerful assurance. "Lie quiet and I'll sit here the whole blessed night if it's any comfort."

"It is a comfort," she answered; and her words entered his ears with a piercing sweetness, which was not unlike the sweetness of love. Love it was indeed, he knew now, but a love so sexless, so dispassionate that its joys were like the joys of religion. The tenderness that flooded his breast was less the emotion of man for woman than of the soul for the soul, and the wife whom he had ceased to love in the world's way was nearer to him, more closely, more divinely his, than she had been in the hour of his greatest ecstasy. The appeal she made to him now, lying there helpless, distraught and unlovely, was an appeal which is woven of the strongest fibres in the heart of man—the appeal to the immortal soul to arise and discover its immortality. Connie cried out to him to save her—to save her from the world, from herself, from the hovering powers of evil, and he knew now that his joy in the hour of her salvation would be as the joy of the angels in heaven. He would fight for her as he had never fought for his own life, and he felt suddenly that there was nothing upon the earth nor in the sky that was strong enough to contend against the power of his compassion. All lesser desires or emotions shrank before it and vanished utterly away—his ambition, his longing for health wherewith to work, the increasing ardour of his love for Laura—these were as naught before the bond which united him to the terrified, small soul that trembled beneath his hands. And immediately that goodness at which Kemper or Perry Bridewell would have laughed—the goodness which is spirit, which both builds and destroys, which knows no law except the divine law of its

own being; in which there is neither the whitened surface nor the loud self-glorification of the Pharisee—the goodness which is a pure flame, a consuming passion—this appeared to his eyes in all its alluring beauty. The way of it was hard, he knew, a way of service, of self-sacrifice, and yet the one way of happiness as well. This lesson he had learned from himself—for it is the thing that no man can teach another—and because it had come to him from himself he knew that it had come to him from God.

"I made a plan on the way home to-night," he said, keeping his firm touch upon her throbbing temples. "To-morrow I shall arrange for a fortnight's absence at the office and the next day I'll take you South. There you'll stay out of doors and get well again. The flesh will come back to your body and the colour to your cheeks.

"I shall never be pretty again—never," she moaned, as he held her.

"Nonsense. You're a trifle pale and fagged that's all—but we'll have you a beauty again before two weeks are up."

And so through the long night he sat with his touch, which compelled quiet, upon her body, for when, after she had fallen at last into a fitful slumber, he arose and lowered the lights, she started up with a scream and called out that she was "alone—fearfully alone!" Then, as he returned to his chair, she reached for him in the darkness and clung desperately to his outstretched arm, drawing it presently across her shoulders until she lay as if shielded by the soothing familiar presence.

CHAPTER II

An Advance and a Retreat

It was the day after this, while Laura was still in Kemper's thoughts, that he ran across her as she came out of a church in Twenty-ninth Street. At the first glance she appeared a little startled, but the disturbance was so slight that it passed swift as a shadow across her face, and the next instant the illumining smile which he had thought of as her one memorable beauty shone from her eyes and lips.

"At first I hardly recognised you," she explained, "you don't look quite as I remembered you."

His amused glance lingered upon her face. "So you did remember me?" he said and the retort was so characteristic of the man that Gerty Bridewell would have paused waiting for it after she had spoken. If there was the smallest loophole apparent in the conversation through which the personal intention might be made to enter, he took to it as instinctively as the fox takes to the covert. The mere uttered words were what he might have responded to any woman who unconsciously gave him the opportunity, yet as he looked down upon Laura, in her velvet hat and black furs, at his side, he was filled with amazement at the interest aroused in him by her slender, though delicately suggestive figure. He felt the magnetic touch of her through the very

flutter of her skirts—felt the fervour of her soul, the warmth of her personality, and he found himself attracted by her as by the mystery of a bright and distant flame. The intensity of life—the radiant energy of intellect—was in her look, in her voice, in her smile—and he knew instinctively that she was capable of larger issues—of higher heights and deeper depths—than any woman he had ever known. She puzzled him into a sympathy which quickened with each fresh instant of uncertainty, and it seemed to him, while she moved by his side, that the illusion of mystery was the one perennial charm a woman could possess—a mystery which lay not only in the flame and shadow of her expression, but in the intenser irregularities of her profile, in the curved darkness of her eyebrows, in the fulness of her mouth, in the profound eloquence of her eyes, in the pale amber of her skin, which was like porcelain touched by a flame, in her gestures, in her walk, in her delicate bosom and slender swaying hips, in her voice, her hands, her words, and in the blackness of her abundant hair braided low upon the nape of her slender neck. And this illusion—stronger than the illusion of beauty because more subtle, more tantalisingly inexplicable, caught and held his attention with a vivid and irresistible appeal.

At his words she had turned toward him with an animated gesture, while her hand in its white glove slipped from the large muff she held.

"It would be a poor memory that could not hold three days," she laughed.

"Three days?" He raised his eyebrows with a blithe interrogation which lent a peculiar charm

to his expression. "Why, I thought that I had known you forever!"

She shook her head in a merry protest, though she felt herself flush slowly under the gay deference in his eyes.

"Forever is a long day. There are few people that it pays to know forever."

"And how do you know that you are not one of them—for me?" he asked.

"How do I know?" she took up the question in a voice which even in her lightest moments was not without a quality of impassioned earnestness. "The one infallible way of knowing anything is to know it without really knowing how or why one knows. My intuitions, you see, are my deeper wisdom."

"And what do your intuitions have to say in regard to me?"

"Only," she responded, smiling, "that it would be dangerous for us to attempt an acquaintance that should last forever."

"Dangerous!" the word excited his imagination and he felt the sting of it in his blood. "What harm do you think would come of it?"

"The harm that always comes of the association between opposites," she answered quickly, and the laughter, he was prompt to notice, had died from her voice, "the harm of endless disagreements, of lost illusions."

"Why should our illusions, if we were so fortunate as to have them, inevitably be lost?" he asked, provoked into an assurance of his interest by the serene disinclination she displayed.

"Because they invariably are if they are illusions?"

she responded, "and you and I could never be absolute realities to each other, since to reach the reality in a person one must not only apprehend but comprehend as well. I doubt if there can be any permanent friendship between people who are totally unlike."

Half angrily he swung the stick he carried at his side. "Then what becomes of the attraction of opposites?" he insisted.

"A catastrophe usually," she returned.

Her composed indifference irritated him more than he was willing to admit even to himself. Never in his recollection had he encountered a woman who showed so marked a disinclination for his society; and the wonder of her avoidance challenged him into the exercise of the personal magnetism he had always found so invincible in its attraction. Had she met his advances with unaffected feminine eagerness, he would have parted, probably, from her at the next corner, but her polite indifference kept him, though indignant, still at her side. Of adulation he was weary, but a positive aversion promised a new and exhilarating experience of life.

"But why are you so sure that we are opposites?" he enquired presently.

"How am I sure that you prefer fair women—and adore an ample beauty?" she retorted lightly. "My intuitions again!"

"Your intuitions are so numerous that they must be sometimes wrong," he remarked.

"Oh, my intuitions are helped out by Gerty's observation," she laughed in response.

"Ah, I see," he said; and it seemed to him that

he understood now her open avoidance, her barely concealed dislike, and the distant reticence which made her appear to him as remote as a star. Gerty had whispered of his affairs—perhaps of Madame Alta, and in Laura's unworldly vision his delinquencies had showed strangely distorted and out of drawing. His anger blazed up within him, yet he knew that the attraction of the woman beside him was increased rather than diminished by his resentment.

"So my pretty cousin has given me a bad character," he observed, and his annoyance roughened his usually genial voice.

"On the other hand she admires you very much," Laura hastened to assure him; "she sings your praises with unflagging energy."

"Then, this, I suppose, you have counted a curse to me," he quoted a little bitterly.

As she walked beside him she felt the contact of the nervous irritation she had provoked, and she found suddenly that almost in spite of herself she was rejoicing in the masculine quality of his presence —in his muscular strength, in the vibrant tones of his voice and in the ardent vitality with which he moved. But the force of his personality was a force against which she felt that she would struggle until the end.

"I'm not sure about the curse," she answered, "but Gerty's heroes and mine are rarely the same, you know."

"Then, I suppose, it's virtue that you are after," he remarked.

She looked gravely up at him before she bowed

her head in assent. "I like virtue," she responded quietly. "Don't you?"

"God knows, I do," he replied without hesitation in the grandiloquent tone he loved to assume upon occasions. "But do you think," he added presently, "that a man can acquire virtue unless it has been born in him?"

"I think it is another name for wisdom," she replied, "and that is often found late and in hard places."

He looked at her with an attention which had become absorbed, exclusive. "Do you know, I thought virtue was what women didn't care about in men?" he said, and his voice was tense with curiosity.

"Perhaps you mistake the conventions for virtue," she rejoined; "men usually do." Then after a moment she added frankly, "But I know very little of what women like or don't like. I've never really known but two besides my aunts—and one of these is Gerty."

"And you are very fond of Gerty?" he enquired.

As she looked up at him it seemed to him that her smile was a miracle of light. "I love her more than anyone in the whole world," she said.

Again she perplexed him, and with each fresh perplexity he was conscious of an increasing desire to understand. "But I thought all women hated one another," he observed.

"That's because men have ruled the world in two ways," she returned, and her protest was not without a smothered indignation; "they have made the laws and they have made the jokes."

Her championship of her sex amused even while it attracted him—he saw in it a kind of abstract honour which he had always believed to be lacking in the feminine mind—and at the same instant he remembered the rancorous jealousy which had controlled Madame Alta's relations with other women, the petty stings he had seen dealt at Gerty by her less lovely acquaintances, and the thousand small insincerities he heard around him every day. The very enthusiasm with which she spoke, the intensity in her face, the decision in her voice, impressed him in a manner for which he was utterly unprepared. In the world in which he moved an enthusiasm which was not at the same time an affectation would have appeared awkwardly out of place. Women whom he knew were vivaciously excited over their winnings or losses at bridge whist, but he could not recall that he had ever seen a single one of them stirred to utterance by any impersonal question of injustice. To be sure there were charitable ones among them, he supposed, but he had always tended by a kind of natural selection toward the conspicuously fair, and the conspicuously fair had proved invariably to be the secretly selfish as well. His social life appeared to him now, as he walked by Laura's side, to have been devoid of sincerity as of intelligence, and he recalled with disgust the exquisite empty voice of Madame Alta, her lyric sensuality, and the grossness of her affairs with her many lovers. Was it the after taste of bitterness in his "wine and honey" which caused it to turn suddenly nauseous in his remembrance?

"And so women can really like one another without jealousy?" he questioned, laughing.

"What is there to be jealous of?" she retorted quickly. "For after all one is one's self, you know, and not another. Gerty is beautiful and I am not, but her loveliness is as keen a delight to me as it is to her—keener, I think, for she is sometimes bored with it and I never am. And she is more than this, too, for she is as devoted—as loyal as she is lovely."

"To you—yes," he answered slowly, for he was thinking of the Gerty whom he had known—of her audacious cynicism, her startling frankness, her suggestive coquetry. Was it possible that this creature of red and white flesh, of sweetness and irony, was really a multiple personality—the possessor of divers souls? Had he seen only the surface of her because it was to the surface alone that he had appealed? Or was it that Laura's creative instinct had builded an image out of her own ideals which she had called by Gerty's name? He did not know—he could not even attempt to answer—but the very confusion of his thoughts strengthened the emotional interest which Laura had aroused. And as each new and vivid sensation effaces from the mind every impression that has gone before it, so at this moment, in the ardent awakening of his temperament, there existed no memory of the past occasions upon which other women had allured as irresistibly his inflamed imagination. So far as his immediate reflections were concerned Laura might have been the solitary woman upon a solitary planet. If he had paused to remember he might have recalled that he had fallen in love with the girl whom

he afterward married between the sunset and the moonrise of a single day—that his passion for Madame Alta leaped, full armed, into being during her singing of the balcony scene in "Romeo and Juliet"—but he did not pause to remember, for with that singular forgetfulness which characterises the man of pleasure, the present sensation, however small, was still sufficient to lessen the influence of former loves.

They strolled slowly down to Gramercy Park, and this time, as they stood together before her door, she asked him, flushing a little, if he would not come inside.

"I only wish I could," he answered, taking out his watch, "but I've promised to meet a man at the club on the stroke of five. If you'll extend the privilege, however, I'll take advantage of it before many days."

His words ended in a laugh, but she felt a moment afterward, as she entered the house and he turned away, that he had looked at her as no man had ever done in her life before. She grew hot all over as she thought of it, yet there had been nothing to resent in his easy freedom and she was not angry. The gay deference was still in his eyes, but beneath it she had been conscious for an instant that the whole magnetic current of his personality flowed to her through his look. That the glance he had bent upon her was one of his most effective methods of impressing his individuality she did not know. Gerty could have told her that he resorted to it invariably at the psychological instant—and so, perhaps, could Madame Alta had she chosen to be confidential. As a conscious or unconscious trick

of manner it had served its purpose in many a place when words appeared a difficult or dangerous medium of expression—but to Laura in her almost cloistral ignorance it was at once a revelation and an enlightenment. When it passed from her she found that the face of the whole world was changed.

Indoors Mr. Wilberforce and Gerty Bridewell were awaiting her, but it seemed to her that her attitude toward them had grown less intimate—that she herself, her friends, and even the ordinary surroundings of her life, were different from what they had been only several hours before. She wanted to be alone—to retreat into herself in search of a clearer knowledge, and even her voice sounded strangely altered in her own ears.

"You look as if you had been frightened, Laura; what is it?" asked Gerty, pressing her hand.

"It is nothing," returned Laura, with a startled glance; "it is only that my head aches." She pressed her hands upon her temples, and the throbbing of her pulses against her finger tips confirmed her words. When, after a few sympathetic questions, they rose to go, she was aware all at once of a great relief—a relief which seemed to her an affront to friendship so devoted as theirs.

"Roger tells me that we are to have the new book on Wednesday," said Mr. Wilberforce, as he stood looking down upon her with the peculiar insight which belongs to the affection of age. Then it seemed to her suddenly that he understood the cause of her disturbance and that there were both pity and disappointment in his eyes.

"I hope so," she answered, smiling the first insincere

smile of her life, for even as she uttered the words she knew that she no longer felt the old eager, consuming interest in her work, and that the making of books appeared to her an employment which was tedious and without end. Why, she wondered vaguely, had she devoted her whole life to a pursuit in which there was so little of the pulsation of the intenser realities? She felt at the instant as if a bandage had dropped from before her eyes, and the fact that Kemper as an individual did not enter into her thoughts in no wise lessened his tremendous moral effect upon her awakening nature. Not one man, but life itself was making its appeal to her, and for the first time she realised something of the intoxication that might dwell in pleasure—in pleasure accepted solely as a pursuit, as an end in and for itself alone. Then, a moment later, standing by her desk in her room upstairs, she remembered, in an illuminating flash, the look with which Kemper had parted from her at her door.

CHAPTER III

The Moth and the Flame

Several weeks after this, on the day that Trent's first play was accepted, he dropped in to Adams' office, where the editor was busily giving directions about the coming *Review*.

"I know you aren't in a mood for interruptions," began the younger man, in a voice which, in spite of his effort at control, still quivered with a boyish excitement, "but I couldn't resist coming to tell you that Benson has at last held out his hand. I'm to be put on in the autumn."

Adams laid down the manuscript upon which he was engaged, and turned with the winning smile which Trent had grown to look for and to love.

"Well, that is jolly news," he said heartily, "you know without my saying so that there is no one in New York who is more interested in your success than I am. We'll make a fine first night of it."

"That's why I dropped in to tell you," responded Trent, while his youthful enthusiasm made Adams feel suddenly as old as failure. "I came about a week ago, by the way, but that shock-headed chap at the door told me you were out of town."

Adams nodded as he picked up the manuscript again.

"I took Mrs. Adams south," he replied. "Her health had given way."

"So I heard, but I hope she's well again by now?"

"Oh, she's very much better, but one never knows, of course, how long one can manage to keep one's health in this climate. I hate to make you hurry off," he added, as the other rose from his chair.

"I want to carry my good news to Miss Wilde," rejoined Trent. "Do you know, she was asking about you only the other day."

"Is that so? I've hardly had time for a word with her for three weeks. Mrs. Adams has not been well and I've kept very closely at home ever since I got back. Will you tell her this from me? It's a nuisance, isn't it, that life is so short one never has time, somehow, for one's real pleasures? Now, Laura Wilde is one of my real pleasures," he pursued, with his quiet humour, "so when there's a sacrifice to be made, its always the pleasure instead of the business that goes overboard. Oh, it's a tremendous pity, of course, but then so many things are that, you know, and its confoundedly difficult, after all, to edit a magazine and still keep human."

The winning smile shone out again, and Trent noticed how it transfigured the worn, sallow face under the thin brown hair.

"Well, you may comfort yourself with the reflection that it's easy to be human but hard to edit a magazine," laughed the younger man, adding, as he went toward the door and paused near the threshold, "I haven't seen you, by the way, since Miss Wilde's last poems are out. Don't you agree with me that her 'Prelude' is the biggest thing she's done as yet?"

"The biggest—yes, but there's no end to my belief in her, you know," said Adams. "She'll live to go far beyond this, and I'm glad to see that her work is winning slowly. Every now and then one runs across a rare admirer."

"And she is as kind as she is gifted," remarked Trent fervently. Then he made his way through the assistant editors in the outer office, and hastened with his prodigious news to Gramercy Park.

Laura was alone, and after sending up his name, he followed the servant to her study on the floor above, where he found her working with a pencil, as she sat before a brightly burning wood fire, over a manuscript which he saw to his surprise was not in verse. At his glance of enquiry she smiled and laid the typewritten pages carelessly aside.

"No, it's not mine," she said. "They're several short stories which Mr. Kemper did many years ago, and he's asked me to look over them. I find, by the way, that they need a great deal of recasting."

"Is it possible," he exclaimed in amazement, "that you allow people to bore you with stuff like that?"

The smile which flickered almost imperceptibly across her lips mystified him completely, and he drew his chair a little nearer that he might bring himself directly beneath her eyes.

"Oh, well, I don't mind it once in a while," she returned, "though he hasn't in the very least the literary sense."

"But I wasn't aware that you even knew him," he persisted, puzzled.

"It doesn't take long to know some people," she retorted gayly; then as her eyes rested upon his face, she spoke with one of her sympathetic flashes of insight: "You've come to bring me good news about the play," she said. "Benson has accepted it—am I not right?"

"I'm jolly glad to say you are!" he assented with enthusiasm. "It will be put on in the autumn and Benson has suggested Katie Hanska for the leading rôle."

His voice died out in a joyous tremor, and he sat looking at her with all the sparkles in his young blue eyes.

"I am glad," said Laura, and she stretched out her hand, which closed warmly upon his. "I can't tell you—it's useless to try—how overjoyed I am."

"I knew you'd be," he answered softly, while his grateful glance caressed her. The triumph of the day—which seemed to him prophetic of the triumph of the future—went suddenly to his head, and in some strange presentiment he felt that his emotion for Laura was bound up and made a part of his success in literature. He could not, try as he would—dissociate her from her books, nor her books from his, and as he sat there in ecstatic silence, with his eyes on her slender figure in its soft black gown, he told himself that the morning's happy promise united them in a close, an indissoluble bond of fellowship. He saw her always under the literary glamour—he felt the full charm of the poetic genius—the impassioned idealism which she expressed, and it became almost impossible for him to detach the personality of the woman herself from the personality of the

writer whom he felt, after all, to be the more intimately vivid of the two.

"I knew you'd be," he repeated, and this time he spoke with a passionate assurance. "If you hadn't been I'd have found the whole thing worthless."

She looked up still smiling, and he watched her large, beautiful forehead, on which the firelight played as on a mirror. "Well, one's friends do add zest to the pleasure," she returned.

For a moment he hesitated; then leaning forward he spoke with a desperate resolve. "One's friends—yes—but you have been more than a friend to me since the beginning—since the first day. You have been everything. I could not have lived without you."

He saw her curved brows draw quickly together, and she bent upon him a look in which he read pity, surprise and a slight tinge of amusement. "Oh, you poor boy, is it possible that you imagine all this?" she asked.

"I imagine nothing," he answered with a wounded and despairing indignation, "but I have loved you—I have dreamed of you—I have lived for you since the first moment that I saw you."

"Then you have been behaving very foolishly," she commented, "for what you are in love with is a shadow—a poem, a fancy that isn't myself at all. The real truth is," she pursued, with a decision which cut him to the heart, "that you are in love with a literary reputation and you imagine that it's a woman. Why, I'm not only older than you in years, I'm older in soul, older in a thousand lives. There is nothing foolish about me, nothing pink and

white and fleshly perfect—nothing that a boy like you could hold to for a day——"

She broke off and sat staring into the fire with a troubled and brooding look—a look which seemed to lose the fact of his presence in some more absorbing vision at which she gazed. He noticed even in his misery that she had suffered during the last few weeks an obscure, a mysterious change—it was as if the flame-like suggestion, which had always belonged to her personality, had of late gathered warmth, light, effectiveness, consuming, as it strengthened, whatever had been passive or without definite purpose in her nature. Her face seemed to him more than ever to be without significance judged by a purely physical standard—more than ever he felt it to be but a delicate and sympathetic medium for the expression of some radiant quality of soul.

"I did not know—I would not have believed that you could be so cruel," he protested with bitterness.

"I can be anything," she answered slowly, drawing her gaze with an effort from the fire. "Most women can."

The glory of the morning passed from him as suddenly as it had come, and he told himself with the uncompromising desperation of youth that for all he cared now his great play might remain forever in oblivion. Life itself appeared as empty—as futile as his ambition—so empty, indeed, that he began immediately in the elastic melancholy which comes easily at twenty-five—to plan the consoling details of an early death. When he remembered his buoyant happiness of a few hours ago it seemed to him almost ridiculous, and he experienced a curious sensation

of detachment, of having drifted out of his proper and peculiar place in life. "I shall never be happy again and I am no longer the same person that I was yesterday—or even a half hour ago," he thought with a determination to be completely miserable. Yet even while the words were in his mind he found himself weighing almost instinctively the literary value of his new emotion, and to his horror the situation in which he now stood began slowly to take a dramatic form in his mental vision. The very attitude into which he had unconsciously fallen—as he paused with his face averted and his hand tightening with violence upon a book he had picked up—showed to his imagination as a bit of restrained emotional acting beyond the footlights.

"Then there's nothing I can do but go straight to the devil," he declared with resolution, and at the same instant he found to his supreme self-contempt that he was wondering how the speech would sound in the mouth of an actor in his drama.

"Or write another play," suggested Laura, while he started quickly and turned toward the door.

"I'll never write another," he said in a voice of gloom, which he tried with all his soul to make an honest expression of his state of mind. "I wish now I hadn't written this one. I wouldn't if I'd known."

"Then it's just as well that you didn't," she returned with a positive motherly assurance. "My poor dear boy," she added soothingly, "you are not the first man of twenty-five who has mistaken the literary mania for the passion of love, and I fear that you will not be the last. There seems, curiously enough, to be a strange resemblance between

the two emotions. If you'd only look at me plainly without any of your lovely glamour you'll see in a minute what nonsense it all is. Why, you are all the time in your heart of hearts in love with some little blonde thing with pink cheeks who is still at school."

He turned away in a passion of wounded pride; then coming back again he stood looking moodily down upon her.

"I'll prove to you if it kills me that I've spoken the truth," he declared, and it seemed to him that the words were not really what he meant to say—that they came from him against his will because he had fitted them into the mouth of an imaginary character.

"Oh, please don't," she begged.

"I suppose I may still see you sometimes?" he enquired.

"Oh, dear, yes; whenever you like."

Then while he stood there, hesitating and indignant, the servant brought her a card, and as she took it from the tray, he saw a flush that was like a pale flame overspread her face.

"It's Mr. Kemper now," she said. "Why will you not stay and be good and forget?"

"I'd rather meet the devil himself at this minute," he cried in a boyish rage that brought tears to his eyes. "It seems to me that I spend half my life getting out of his way."

"But don't you like him?" she enquired curiously. "Every one likes him, I think."

"Well, I'm not every one," he blurted out angrily, "for I think him a consummate, thickheaded ass."

"Good heavens!" she gayly ejaculated, "what a

character you give him." Then, as he was leaving the room, she reached out, and taking his hand, drew him against his will, back to his chair. "You shall not go like this—I'll not have it," she said. "Do you think I am a stone that I can bear to spoil all your beautiful triumph. Here, sit down and I promise to make you like both him and me."

As she finished, Kemper came in with his energetic step and his genial greeting, and she introduced the two men with a little flattering smile in Trent's direction. "You have the honour to meet our coming playwright," she added with a gracious gesture, skilfully turning the conversation upon the younger man's affairs, while she talked on with a sweetness which at once distracted and enraged him. He listened to her at first moodily and then with an attention which, in spite of his resolution, was fixed upon the fine points of his play as she made now and then friendly suggestions as to the interpretations of particular lines or scenes. The charming deference in her voice soothed his ruffled vanity and it seemed to him presently that the flattering intoxication of her praise sent his imagination spinning among the stars.

Kemper listened to it all with an intelligent and animated interest, and when he spoke, as he did from time to time, it was to put a sympathetic question which dismissed Trent's darling prejudice into the region of departed errors. To have held out against the singular attraction of the man, would have been, Trent thought a little later, the part of a perverse and stiffnecked fool. It was not only that he succumbed to Kemper's magnetism, but that he recognised his sincerity—his utter lack of the dis-

simulation he had once believed him to possess. Then, as Kemper sat in the square of sunlight which fell through the bow window, Trent noticed each plain, yet impressive detail of his appearance. He saw the peculiar roughness of finish which lent weight, if not beauty, to his remarkably expressive face, and he saw, too, with an eye trained to attentive observation, that the dark brown hair, so thick upon the forehead and at the back of the neck, had already worn thin upon the crown of the large, well-turned head. "In a few years he will begin to be bald," thought the younger man, "then he will put on glasses, and yet these things will not keep him from appealing to the imaginary ideal of romance which every woman must possess. Even when he is old he will still have the power to attract, if he cannot keep the fancy." But the bitterness had gone out of his thoughts, and a little later, when he left the house and walked slowly homeward, he discovered that a hopeless love might lend a considerable sweetness to a literary life. After all, he concluded, one might warm oneself at the flame, and yet neither possess it utterly nor be destroyed.

His mother sat knitting by the window when he entered the apartment, and he saw that the table was already laid for dinner in the adjoining room.

"I ordered dinner a little earlier for you," she explained as she laid aside the purple shawl while the ball of yarn slipped from her short, plump knees and rolled under the chair in which she sat. Never in his recollection had he seen her put aside her knitting that the ball did not roll from her lap upon the floor, and now as he stooped to follow the loosened

skein, he wondered vaguely how she had been able to fill her life with so trivial and monotonous an employment.

"I wish you could get out," he said, as he sat down on a footstool at her feet and leaned his head affectionately against her knees. "I don't believe you've had a breath of air for a month."

"Why, I never went out of doors in the snow in my life," she responded, "at least not since I was a child—and it always snows here except when it rains. Do you know," she pursued, with one of her mild glances of curiosity through the window, "I can't imagine how the people in that big apartment over there ever manage to get through the day. Why, the woman stays in bed every morning until eleven o'clock and then the maid brings her something like chocolate on a tray. She wears such beautiful wrappers, too, I really don't see how she can be entirely proper, and then she seems to fly in such rages with her husband. There are some children, I believe," she went on with increasing animation, "but they are never allowed to set foot in her room, and this afternoon when she dressed to go out I saw her try on at least four different hats and every single one of them green."

"Poor creature!" observed Trent, with a laugh, "it must be worse than living under the omnipresent eye of Providence. By the way, I told the man to come up and have a look at the radiator. Did he do it?"

She laid her large, plump hand upon his head with a touch that was as soft as her ball of yarn.

"The manager came himself," she replied, "but

we got to talking and after I found out how much trouble he had had in life—he lost his wife and two little boys all in one year—I didn't like to say anything about the heating. I was afraid it would hurt his feelings to find I had a complaint to make—he seemed so very nice and obliging. And, after all," she concluded amiably, "the rooms do get quite warm, you know, just about the time we are ready to go to bed, so all I need to do is to wear my cloak a little while when I first get up in the morning. It will be a very good way to make some use of it, for I never expect to go out of doors again in this climate."

"You'll have to go once," he said gayly, "to the first rehearsal of my play. You can't afford to miss it."

"Oh, I'll muffle up well on that occasion," she answered. "Did you see Mr. Benson this morning? and what did he say to you?"

"A great deal—he was quite enthusiastic—for *him*, you know."

"I wonder what he is like," she murmured with her large, sweet seriousness. "Is he married, and has he any children?"

"I didn't investigate. You see I was more interested in my own affairs. He wants Katie Hanska to take the leading part. You may have seen her picture—it was in one of the magazines I brought you."

"Did you enquire anything about her?" she asked earnestly, "I mean about her character and her bringing up. I couldn't bear to have the part played by any but a pure woman, and they tell me that so many actresses aren't—aren't quite that.

Before you consent I hope you'll find out very particularly about the life she has led."

"Oh, I dare say she's all right," he remarked, with the affectionate patience which was one of his more amiable characteristics. "At any rate she has the mettle for the rôle."

"I hope she's good," said his mother softly, and she added after a moment, "do you remember that poor Christina Coles I was telling you about not long ago?"

"Why, yes," replied Trent; "the pretty girl with the blue eyes and the uncompromising manner? What's become of her, I wonder?"

"I fear," began his mother, while she lowered her voice and glanced timidly around as if she were on the point of a shameful disclosure, "I honestly fear that she is starving."

"Starving!" exclaimed St. George, in horror, and he sprang to his feet as if he meant to plunge at once into a work of rescue. "Why, how long has she been about it?"

"I know she has stopped coming to see me because her clothes are so shabby," returned Mrs. Trent, with what seemed to him a calmness that was almost cruel, "and the charwoman tells me that she lives on next to nothing—a loaf of baker's bread and a bit of cheese for dinner. It takes all the little money she can rake and scrape together to pay her room rent—for it seems that the papers have stopped publishing her stories."

"For God's sake, let's do something—let's do it quickly," exclaimed Trent, in an agony of sympathy.

"I was just thinking that you might run up and

see if she would come down to dine with us," said the old lady; "it really makes me miserable to feel that she doesn't get even enough to eat."

"Why, I'll go before I dress—I'll go this very minute," declared the young man. "Shall I tell her that we dine in half an hour or do you think, if she's so very hungry, you might hurry it up a bit?"

"In half an hour—she'll want a little time," replied his mother, and she added presently, "but she's so proud, poor thing, that I don't believe she'll come."

The words were said softly, but had they been spoken in a louder tone, Trent would not have heard them for he had already hastened from the room.

In response to his knock, Christina opened her door almost immediately, and when she recognised him a look of surprise appeared upon her face.

"Won't you come in?" she asked, drawing slightly aside with a politeness which he felt to be an effort to her, "my room is not very orderly, but perhaps you will not mind?"

She wore a simple cotton blouse, the sleeves of which were a little rumpled as if they had been rolled up above her elbows, and her skirt of some ugly brown stuff was shabby and partly frayed about the edges—but when she looked at him with her sincere blue eyes, he forgot the disorder of her dress in the touching pathos of her gallant little figure. She was very pretty, he saw, in a fragile yet resolute way—like a child that is possessed of a will of iron—and because of her prettiness he found himself resenting her literary failures with an acute personal resentment. The tenderness of his sympathy seemed

to increase rather than diminish his hopeless love for Laura, and while he gazed at Christina's flower-like eyes and smooth brown hair, which shone like satin, there stole over him a poetic melancholy that was altogether pleasant. It was as if he had suddenly discovered a companion in his unhappiness, and he thought all at once that it would be charming to pour the sorrows of his love into the pretty ears hidden so quaintly under the smooth brown hair. Love, at the moment, appeared to him chiefly as something to be talked about—an emotion which one might turn effectively into the spoken phrase.

She drew back into the room and he followed her while his sympathetic glance dwelt upon the sleeping couch under its daytime covering of cretonne, upon the small gas stove on which a kettle boiled, upon the cupboard, the dressing table, the desk at which she wrote, and the torn and mended curtains before the single window. Though she neither apologised nor showed in her manner the faintest embarrassment, he felt instinctively that her fierce maidenly pride was putting her to torture.

"I came with a message from my mother," he hastened to explain as he stood beside her on the little strip of carpet before the gas stove, "she sends me to beg that you will dine with us this evening as a particular favour to her. She is so much alone, you know, that a young visitor is just what she needs."

Christina continued to regard him, as she had done from the first, with her sincere, unsmiling eyes, but he saw a flush rise slowly to her face in a wave of colour, turning the faint pink in her cheeks to crimson.

"I am very much obliged to her," she said, in her

fresh attractive voice, "but I am just in the middle of a story and I cannot break off just now. I write," she added positively, "every evening."

As she finished she picked up some closely written sheets from the desk and held them loosely in her hand, enforcing by a gesture the unalterableness of her decision. "I hope you will give her my love—my dear love," she said presently, with girlish sweetness, "and tell her how sorry I am that it is impossible."

"You are writing stories, then—still?" he asked, lingering in the face of her evident desire to be rid of him.

"Oh, yes, I write all the time—every day."

"But do you find a market for so many?"

She shook her head: "The beginning is always hard—have you never read the lives of the poets? But when one gives up everything else—when one has devoted one's whole life——"

Knowing what he did of her mistaken ambition, her fruitless sacrifices, the thing appeared to him as a terrible and useless tragedy. He saw the thinness of her figure, the faint lines which her tireless purpose had written upon her face—and he felt that it was on the tip of his tongue to beg her to give it up—to reason with her in the tone of a philosopher and with the experience of the author of an accepted play. But presently when he spoke, he found that his uttered words were not of the high and ethical character he had planned.

"She will be very much disappointed, I know," he said at last; and though he told himself that a great deal of good might be done by a little perfectly

plain speaking, still he did not know how to speak it nor exactly what it would be.

"Thank her for me—I—I should love to see her oftener if I had the time—if it were possible," said Christina. And then he went to the door because he could think of no excuse sufficient to keep him standing another minute upon the hearthrug.

"I hope you will remember," he said from the threshold, "that we are always down stairs—at least my mother is—and ready to serve you at any moment in any way we can."

The assurance appeared to make little impression upon her, but she smiled politely, and then closing the door after him, sat down to eat her dinner of cold bread and corned meat.

CHAPTER IV

Treats of the Attraction of Opposites

As soon as Trent had left the room Laura felt that the silence became oppressive and constrained. For the first time in her life she found herself overwhelmed with timidity—with a fear of the too obvious word—and this timidity annoyed her because she was aware that she no longer possessed the strength with which to struggle against it. That it was imperative for her to lighten the situation by a trivial remark, she saw clearly, yet she could think of nothing to say which did not sound foolish and even insincere when she repeated it in her thoughts. Had she dared to follow her usual impulse and be uncompromisingly honest, she would have said, perhaps: "I am silent because I am afraid to speak and yet I do not know why I am afraid, nor what it is that I fear." In her own mind she was hardly more lucid than this, and the mystery of her heart was as inscrutable to herself as it was to Kemper.

Then, presently, a rush of anger—of hot resentment—put courage into her determination, and raising her head, with an impatient gesture, she looked indifferently into his face. He was still sitting in the square of sunlight, which had almost faded away, and as she turned toward him, he met her gaze with his intimate and charming smile. Though

his words were casual usually. and uttered in a tone of genial raillery, this smile, whenever she met it, seemed to give the lie to every trifling phrase that he had spoken. "What is the use of all this ridiculous fencing when you fill my thoughts and each minute of the day I think only of you," said his look. So vivid was the impression she received now, that she felt instantly that he had caressed her in his imagination. Her heart beat quickly, while she rose to her feet with an indignant impulse.

"What is it?" he asked and she knew from his voice that he was still smiling. "What is the matter?"

Picking up his typewritten manuscript, she returned with it to her chair, drawing, as she sat down, a little farther away.

"I merely wanted to look over this," she returned, "Mr. Trent interrupted me in my reading."

"Then you've something to thank him for," he remarked gayly, and added in the same tone, "I noticed that he is in love with you—and I am beginning to be jealous."

For an instant she looked at him in surprise; then she remembered his affected scorn of what he called "social cowardice"—his natural or assumed frankness—and she shook her head with a laugh of protest.

"He in love! Well, yes, he's in love with his imagination. He's too young for anything more definite than that."

"A man is never too young to fall in love," he retorted, "I had it at least six times before I was twenty-one."

The laughter was still on her lips. "You speak as if it were the measles."

"It is—or worse, for when you've pulled through a bad attack of the measles you may safely count yourself immune. With love——" he shrugged his shoulders.

"Do you mean," she asked lightly, "that one can keep it up like that—forever."

He shook his head.

"Oh, I think a case is rare," he replied, "after seventy-five. One usually dies by then."

"And is there never—with a man, I mean—really one?"

"Oh, Lord, yes, there's always one—at a time."

His laughing eyes were probing her, and as she met them, questioningly, she found it impossible to tell whether he was merely jesting or in deadly earnest. With the doubt she felt a sharp prick of curiosity, and with it she realised that in this uncertainty—this flashing suggestion of all possibilities or of nothing—dwelt the singular attraction that he had for her—and for others. Was he only superficial, after all? Or did these tantalising contradictions serve to conceal the hidden depths beneath? Had she for an instant taken him entirely at his word value, she knew that her interest in him would have quickly passed—but the force which dominated him, the lurking seriousness which seemed always behind his laughter, the very largeness of the candour he displayed—these things kept her forever expectant and forever interested.

"I hate you when you are like this," she exclaimed, almost indignantly.

"A woman always hates a man when he tells her the truth," he retorted. "She has a taste for sweets and prefers falsehood."

"It may be the truth as you have seen it," she answered, "but that after all is a very small part of the whole."

"It's big enough at least to be unpleasant."

"Well, it's your personal idea of the truth, all the same," she insisted, "and you can't make it universal. It isn't Gerty's for instance."

"You think not?" he made a face of playful astonishment. "Well, how about its hitting off our friend Perry?"

"Perry!" she replied disdainfully. "Do you know if he weren't so simple, I'd detest him."

"But why?" His eyebrows were still elevated.

"Because he thinks of nothing under the sun but the sensations of his great big body."

"Well, that may not be magnificent," he paraphrased gayly, "but it is man."

"Then, thank heaven, it isn't woman!" she exclaimed.

"Do you mean to tell me," he leaned forward in his chair and she was conscious suddenly that he was very close to her—closer, in spite of the intervening space, than any man had ever been in her life before, "do you honestly mean to tell me that women are different?"

The expression of his face altered as it always did before an approaching change in his mood, and she saw in it something of the satiety—the moral weariness—which is the Nemesis of the soul that is led by pleasure. It was at this moment that she felt an

exquisite confidence in the man himself—in the man hidden behind the cynicism, the affectation, the utter vanity of words.

"Oh, they can't devote themselves to their own sensations when they have to think so much of other people's," she responded merrily; and she felt again the strange impulse of retreat, the prompting to fly before the earnestness that appeared in his voice. While he was flippant, her intuitions told her that she might be serious, but when the banter passed from his tone, she turned to it instinctively as to a defence.

"But those that I have known"—he stopped and looked at her as if he weighed with an experienced eye the exact effect of his words.

She laughed, but it was a laugh of irritation rather than humour. "Perhaps you did not select your examples very wisely," she remarked.

Her look arrested him as he was about to reply, and he spoke evidently upon the impulse of the moment. "Did Gerty tell you about Madame Alta?" he enquired.

She shook her head with an evasion of the question, "I don't remember that it was Gerty."

"But you have heard of her?"

"I've *heard* her," she answered. "It is a very beautiful voice."

He frowned with a nervous irritation, and she saw from his impatient movements that he was under the influence of a disagreeable excitement.

"Well, I was once in love with her," he said bluntly.

She made an indifferent gesture.

"And now I hate her," he added with a sharp intonation.

"Is that the ordinary end of your romances?" she questioned without interest.

"It wasn't romance," he replied bitterly; "it was hell."

Again she caught the note of satiety in his voice, and it stirred her to a feeling of sympathy which she despised in herself.

"At least you worked out your own damnation," she returned coolly.

"One usually does," he admitted. "That's the infernal part of it. But I'm out of it now," he pursued with an egoism which rejoiced in its own strength. "I'm out of it now with a whole skin and I hope to keep decent even if I don't get to heaven. You might not think it," he concluded gravely, "but I'm at bottom as religious a chap as old John Knox."

"You may be," she observed without enthusiasm, "but it's the kind of religion which impresses me not at all."

"Well, it might have been better," he said, "but I never had a chance. I've known such devilish women all my life."

Humour shone in her eyes, making her whole face darkly brilliant with expression. "Do you know that you show a decided family resemblance to Adam," she observed.

"It does sound that way," he laughed, "but there's some hard sense in it, after all. A woman has a tremendous effect on a man's life—I mean the woman he really likes."

"Wouldn't it be safer to say the 'women'?" she suggested.

"Nonsense. I was only joking. There is always one who is more than the others—any man will tell you that."

"I suppose any man will—even Perry Bridewell."

"Why not Perry?" he demanded. "You can't imagine how he used to bore the life out of me about Gerty—but Gerty, you know," he added in a burst of confidence which impressed her as almost childlike, "isn't exactly the kind of woman to a—a lift a fellow."

Before his growing earnestness she resorted quickly to the defence of flippancy. "Nor is Perry, I suppose, exactly the kind of man that is lifted," she observed, with a laugh.

He looked at her a moment with a smile which had even then an edge of his characteristic genial irony. "You are the sort of woman who could do that," he said abruptly.

"Could lift Perry? Now, God forbid!" she retorted gayly.

"Oh, Perry be hanged!" he exclaimed, with the candid ill-humour which, strangely enough, had a peculiar attraction for her. "If I had known you fifteen years ago I might be a good deal nearer heaven than I am to-day."

The charm of his earnestness was very great, and she felt that the sudden sensation of faintness which came over her must be visible in her fluttering eyelids and in her trembling hands.

"I haven't faith in a salvation that must be worked out by somebody else," she said, in a voice

she made cold by an effort to render it merely careless.

An instant before he had told himself with emphasis that he would go no further, but the chill remoteness from which she looked at him stirred him to an emotion that was not unlike a jealous anger. She seemed to him then more brightly distant, more sweetly inaccessible than she had done at their first meeting.

"Not even when it is a salvation through love?" he asked impulsively, and at the thought that she was possibly less indifferent than she appeared to be, he felt his desire of her mount swiftly to his head.

Her hand went to her bosom to keep down the wild beating of her heart, but the face with which she regarded him was like the face of a statue. "No—because I doubt the possibility of such a thing," she said.

"The possibility of my loving you or of your saving me?"

"The possibility of both."

"How little you know of me," he exclaimed, and his voice sounded hurt as if he were wounded by her disbelief.

She raised her eyes and looked at him, and for several seconds they sat in silence with only the little space between them.

"It is very well," she said presently, "that I believe nothing that you say to me—or it might be hard to divide the truth from the untruth."

"I never told you an untruth in my life," he protested angrily.

"Doesn't a man always tell them to a woman?" she enquired.

For an instant he hesitated; then he spoke daringly, spurred on by her indifferent aspect. "He doesn't when—he loves her."

"When he loves her more than ever," she returned quietly, as if his remark held for her merely an historic interest, "Perry Bridewell loves Gerty, I suppose, and yet he lies to her every day he lives."

"That's because she likes it," he commented, with a return of raillery.

"She doesn't like it—no woman does. As for me I want the truth even if it kills me."

"It wouldn't kill you," he answered, and the tenderness in his voice made her feel suddenly that she had never known what love could be, "it would give you life." Then his tone changed quickly and the old pleasant humour leaped to his eyes, "and whatever comes I promise never to lie to you," he added.

She shook her head. "I didn't ask it," she rejoined, with a sharp breath.

"If you had," he laughed, "I wouldn't have promised. That's a part of the general contrariness of men—they like to give what they are not asked for."

"Well, I'll never ask anything of you," she said, smiling.

"Is that because you want to get everything?" he enquired gayly.

A pale flush rose to her forehead, and the glow heightened the singular illumination which dwelt

in her face. "Would the best that you could give be more than a little?"

"It would be more than a woman ever got on earth."

"Well, I'm not sure that I would accept your valuation," she remarked, with an effort to keep up the light tone of banter.

"Then make your own," he answered, as he rose from his chair, but his eyes and the strong pressure of his hand on hers said more than this.

"When I've read through the manuscript I'll talk to you about it," she observed, as he was leaving. "If you really want them published, though, they must be considerably altered."

"Oh, do it yourself," he returned, with an embarrassed eagerness. "Do anything you please—put in the literary stuff and all that."

He spoke with an entire unconsciousness of the amount of work he asked of her, and she liked him the better for the readiness with which he took for granted that she possessed the patience as well as the will to serve him.

"Well, we'll talk about it later," she said, and then for the first time during the conversation she raised upon him, in all its mystery of suggestion, that subtle fascination of look which he felt at the instant to be her transcendent if solitary beauty. Through the afternoon he had waited patiently for this remembered smile—had laid traps for it, had sought in vain to capture it unawares, and had she been a worldly coquette bent upon conquest, she could not have used her weapons with a finer or more decisive effect. After more than two hours

in which her remoteness had both disappointed and irritated him, he went away at last with her face at its most radiant moment stamped upon his memory.

CHAPTER V

Shows the Dangers as well as the Pleasures of the Chase

When Kemper looked at his watch on Laura's steps, he found that he had time only to pay a promised call on Gerty Bridewell before he must hurry home to get into his dinner clothes. In his pocket, carelessly thrust there as he left his rooms, was a note from Gerty begging him to drop in upon her for a bit of twilight gossip; and though the request was made with her accustomed lightness, he knew instinctively that she had sought him less for diversion than for advice, and that her reckless pen had been guided by some hidden agitation. When he thought of her it was with a sympathy hardly justified by the outward brilliance of her life—wealth, beauty, power, all the things which he would have called desirable were hers, and the vague compassion she awoke in him appeared to him the result of a simple trick of pathos which she knew how to assume at times. To be sorry for Gerty was absurd, he had always looked upon a hunger for married romance as a morbid and unhealthy passion, and that a woman who possessed a generous husband should demand a faithful one as well seemed to him the freak of an unreasonable and exacting temper. "Men were not born monogamous"—it was a

favourite cynicism of his, for he was inclined to throw upon nature the full burden of her responsibility.

Then, as he signalled a cab at the corner of Fifth Avenue, and after seating himself, clasped his gloved hands over the crook of his walking stick, his thoughts returned, impatient of distraction, to the disturbing memory of Laura.

He had gone too far, this he admitted promptly and without consideration—another minute of her bewildering charm and he felt, with a shiver, that he might have blundered irretrievably into a declaration of love. What a fool he had been, after all, and where was the result of his painfully acquired caution—of his varied experiences with many women? Before entering her doors he had told himself emphatically that the thing should go no further than a pleasant friendship, and yet an hour later he had found his thoughts fairly wallowing in sentiment. To like a woman and not make love to her—was that dream of his purer desires still beyond him—still in the distant region of the happier impossibilities? Marriage had few allurements for him—the respect he felt for it as an institution was equalled only by the disgust with which he regarded it as a personal condition; and a shudder ran through him now as he imagined himself tied to any woman upon earth for the remainder of his days. Without being unduly proud in his own conceit, he was clearly aware that he might be looked upon through worldly eyes as a desirable match—as fair game for a number of wary marriageable maidens; and it did not occur to him that even Laura herself might by any

choice of her own, still stand hopelessly beyond his reach. The thing that troubled him was the knowledge of his own impetuous emotions—with the shield of Madame Alta withdrawn was it not possible that a sudden passion might plunge him headlong even into the abyss of marriage?

"What a consummate, what an unteachable ass I am," he thought as he stared moodily at the passing cabs, "and the odd part of it is that the newest attraction always brings with it a fatal belief in its own permanence. I have been madly in love a dozen times since I left college and yet it seems impossible to me that what I now feel has ever had a beginning or can ever have an end. By Jove, I could almost swear that I've never gone through this before." Then he remembered suddenly one of Laura's most characteristic movements—the swift turn of her profile as she averted her face—and he tried to imagine the quickened sensation with which he might have stooped and kissed the little violet shadow on her neck. "Pshaw!" he exclaimed with angry determination, "does a man never get too old for such rubbish? Am I no better than one of the dotards who hold on to passion after they have lost their teeth?" But in spite of his contemptuous cynicism it seemed to him that he was more in earnest than he had ever been in his life before. There had been nothing so grave—nothing so destructive as this in the impulse which had driven him to Madame Alta.

Gerty was awaiting him alone in her sitting-room upstairs, and as he entered, she stretched out her hands with a gesture of reproachful eagerness.

"You're so late that I've barely a half hour before dressing," she said.

"Why, in heaven's name, didn't you write me sooner?" he enquired, as he threw himself into a chair beside the couch on which she lay half buried amid cushions of pale green satin, "it was a mere accident that I had this spare time on my hands. Where's Perry?"

She shook her head with the piquant disdain he knew so well. "Amusing himself doubtless," she replied, adding with one of her uncontrollable flashes of impulse, "Do you, by the way, I wonder, ever happen to see Ada Lawley now?"

The question startled him, and he sat for a minute staring under bent brows at her indignant loveliness; though she had shrieked out her secret in the tongues of men and of angels, she could have added nothing further to his knowledge. The wonderful child quality which still survived in her beneath all her shallow worldliness dawned suddenly in her wide-open, angry eyes, and he saw clearly at last the hidden canker which was eating at her impatient heart. So this was what it meant, and this was why she had reminded him at times of a pierced butterfly that hides a mortal anguish beneath the beauty of its quivering wings?

"Oh, she isn't exactly the kind to blush unseen, you know," he responded lightly.

"But what is her attraction? I can't fathom it," persisted Gerty, with a burning curiosity. "Is it possible that men think her handsome?"

He laughed softly at her impatience, and then leaning back in his chair, took up her question in a

quizzical tone. "Is she handsome? Well, that depends, I suppose, upon one's natural or acquired taste. Some people like caviar—some don't."

Though she choked down her eagerness, he saw it still fluttering in her beautiful white throat. "Then I may presume that she is caviar to the respectable?" she said with a relapse into her biting sarcasm.

He made a gesture of alarmed protest: "You are to presume nothing—it is never wise to presume against a woman."

"Then I won't if you'll tell me," she returned, "if you'll tell me quite honestly and sincerely all that you think."

Before the mockery in his eyes she fell back with a sigh of disappointment, but he answered the challenge presently in what she had once described as his "paradoxical humour."

"Oh, well, my views have all been distant ones," he said, "but I should judge her to be—since you ask me—a lady who insists upon a remarkable natural beauty with a decidedly artificial emphasis."

He paused for a moment in order to enjoy the flavour of his epigram; but Gerty was too much in earnest to waste her animated attention upon words.

"Oh, of course she makes up," she retorted, "they all do that—men like it."

His puzzling smile dwelt on her for an instant. "Well, I'd rather a woman would be downright bad any day," he said, "it shows less."

"But is she bad?" asked Gerty, almost panting in her pursuit of information. "That's what I want to know—of course she's artificial on the face of it."

"On the face of *her*, you mean," he corrected, and concluded promptly, "but I've never said anything against a woman in my life and it's too late to begin just as I'm getting bald. Doesn't it suffice that the lady has kept her pipe tuned to the general melody?"

"You mean she's careful?"

"I mean nothing—do you?"

With a determined movement she sprang into a sitting position, and drawing the cushions beneath her arm, rested her elbow, bare under the flowing sleeve, upon the luxurious pile of down. He saw the dent made by her figure in the green satin covers, and it gave him a sensation of pleasure while he watched it fade out slowly.

"I—oh, I mean a great deal," she responded in her reckless voice, "I'm as clear, I've always said, as running water, and what you mistake for flippancy is merely my philosophy."

"A philosophy!" he laughed, "then you've gone too deep for me."

"Oh, it isn't deep—it's only this," she rejoined gayly, "he laughs best who laughs most."

"And not who laughs last?"

She shook her head as she played nervously with the lace upon her sleeve. "No, because the last laugh is apt to be a death rattle."

"You give me the shivers," he protested, with a mock shudder, "do you know you are always clever when you are jealous?"

"But I am not jealous," she retorted indignantly; "there's nobody on earth that's worth it—and besides I'm too happy. I'm as happy as the very happiest human being you know. Who's that?"

He thought attentively for a moment: "By Jove, I believe it's Roger Adams," he replied, amazed at his discovery.

For a while Gerty leaned back upon her pillows and considered the question with closed eyes. "I think you're right," she admitted at last, "but why? Why? What on earth has he ever got from life?"

"He has got a wife," he retorted, with his genial irony.

"Well, I suppose he congratulates himself that he hasn't two," was her flippant rejoinder.

Kemper laughed shortly. "I'm not sure that she doesn't equal a good half dozen."

"And yet he *is* happy," said Gerty thoughtfully. "I don't know why and I doubt if he knows either—but I truly and honestly believe he's the happiest man I've ever met. Perhaps," she concluded with a quick return to her shallow wit, "it's because he doesn't divide his waking hours between dressmakers and bridge whist."

"But why do you if it bores you so," protested Kemper, "I'd be hanged before I'd do it in your place."

The little half angry, half weary frown drew her eyebrows together, and she sat for a minute restlessly tapping her slippered foot upon the floor. "Oh, why do women lie and cheat and back-bite and strangle the little souls within them—to please men. Your amusements are built on our long boredom."

Was it merely the trick of pathos again, he wondered, or did the weariness in her voice sound as

true as sorrow? Was she, indeed, as Laura so ardently believed, capable of larger means, of finer issues, and was her very audacity of speech but a kind of wild mourning for the soul that she had killed? A month ago he would not have asked himself the question, but his feeling for Laura had brought with it, though unconsciously, a deeper feeling for life.

"All the same I wouldn't bore myself if I were you," he returned, "and I don't think frankly men are worth it."

She laughed with an impatient jerk of her head. "Oh, it's easy to moralise," she remarked, "but I have enough of that, you know, from Laura."

"From Laura? Then she is with me?"

"She thinks so, but what does she know of life—she has never lived. Why, she isn't even in the world with us, you see." A tender little laugh escaped her. "I've even seen her," she added gayly, "read Plotinus at her dressmaker's. She says he helps her to stand the trying on."

The picture amused him, and he allowed his fancy to play about it for a moment. "I can't conceive of her surrendering to the vanities," he said at last.

"You can't?" Gerty's tone had softened, though she still spoke merrily. "Well, I call no woman safe until she's dead."

His imagination, always eager in pursuit of the elusive possibility, sprang suddenly in the train of her suggestion, and he felt the sting of a dangerous pleasure in his blood.

"Do you mean that it is only her outward cir-

cumstances, her worldly ignorance, that has kept her so wonderfully indifferent?" he asked.

"So she is indifferent?" enquired Gerty with a smile.

"To me—yes."

"Oh, I didn't know that—I suspected——" her pause was tantalising, and she drew it out with an enjoyment that was almost wicked.

"You suspected——" he repeated the words with the nervous irritation which always seized him in moments of excitement.

"I honestly believed," she gave it to him with barely suppressed amusement, "that she really disliked you."

His curiosity changed suddenly to anger, and he remembered, while he choked back an impulsive exclamation, the rage for mastery he had once felt when he found a horse whose temper had more than matched his own. "Did she tell you so?" he demanded hotly.

"Oh, dear, no—she wouldn't for the world."

"Then you're wrong," he said with dogged resolution; "I can make her like me or not just as I choose."

"You can?" she looked lovely but incredulous.

"Why do you doubt it?"

"Because—oh, because you are too different. Do you know—and this is as secret as the grave—if I thought Laura really cared for you it would drive me to despair. But she won't—she couldn't—you aren't half—you aren't one hundredth part good enough, you know."

In spite of his smile she saw that there was a tinge of annoyance in the look he fixed upon

her. "By Jove, I thought you rather liked me!" he exclaimed.

"I do—I love you—I always have." She stretched out her hand until the tips of her fingers rested upon his arm. "You are quite and entirely good enough for me, my dear, but I'm not Laura, and strange as it may seem I honestly care a little more for her than for myself. So if you are really obliged to fall in love again, suppose you let it be with me?"

"With you?" He met her charming eyes with his ironic smile. "Oh, I couldn't—I was brought up on your kind, and perfect as you are, you would only give me the tiresome, familiar society affair. There isn't any mystery about you. I know your secret."

"Well, at least you didn't learn it from Madame Alta," she retorted.

"From Madame Alta! Pshaw! she was never anything but a vocal instrument."

"Do you remember the way she sang this?" asked Gerty; and springing to her feet she fell into an exaggerated mimicry of the prima donna's pose, while she trilled out a languishing passage from "Faust." "I always laughed when she got to that scene," she added, coming back to the couch, "because when she grew sentimental she reminded me of a love-sick sheep."

"Then why do you resurrect her ghost?" he demanded. "So far as I am concerned she might have lived in the last century."

"And yet how mad you used to be about her."

"'Mad'—that's just the word. I was." He drew out his watch, glanced at it, and rose to his feet with an ejaculation of dismay, "Why, you've actually

made me forget that we aren't living in eternity," he said. "I'll be awfully late for dinner and it's every bit your fault."

"But think of me," gasped Gerty, already moving in the direction of her bedroom, "I dine at Ninety-first Street, and I must get into a gown that laces in the back." She darted out with a bird-like flutter; and running quickly down the staircase, he hurried from the house and into a passing cab. During the short drive to his rooms his thoughts were exclusively engrossed with the necessity of making a rapid change and framing a suitable apology for his hostess. The annoyance of the rush served more effectually to banish Laura than any amount of determined opposition would have done.

CHAPTER VI

The Finer Vision

So far as Connie was concerned the trip South had been, to all outward appearance at least, entirely successful. Adams had watched her bloom back into something of her girlish prettiness, and day by day, in the quiet little Florida village to which they had gone, the lines of nervous exhaustion had faded slowly from her face. For the first two weeks she had been content to lie motionless in the balmy air beneath the pines, while she had yielded herself to the silence with a resignation almost pathetic in its childish helplessness. But with her returning vigour the old ache for excitement awoke within her, and to stifle her craving for the drug which Adams had denied her, she had turned at last to the immoderate use of wine. So, hopelessly but with unfailing courage, he had brought her again to New York where he had placed her in the charge of a specialist in obscure diseases of the nerves.

Except for the hours which he spent in his office, he hardly left her side for a minute day or night, and the strain of the close watching, the sleepless responsibility, had produced in him that quivering sensitiveness which made his self-control a bodily as well as a mental effort. Yet through it all he had never relaxed in the fervour of his compassion—had never

paused even to question if the battle were not useless —if Connie herself were worth the sacrifice—until, almost to his surprise, there had come at last a result which, in the beginning, he had neither expected nor desired. A closer reconciliation with life, a stronger indifference to the mere outward show of possession, a deeper consciousness of the reality that lay beyond, above and beneath the manifold illusions —these things had become a part of his mental attitude; and with this widening vision he had felt the flow in himself of that vast, universal pity which has in it more than the sweetness, and something of the anguish of mortal love. In looking at Connie he saw not her alone, but all humanity—saw the little griefs and the little joys of living creatures as they were reflected in the mirror of her small bared soul. Though he had schooled himself for sacrifice he found presently that he had entertained unawares the angel of peace—for it was during these terrible weeks that the happiness at which Gerty Bridewell had wondered possessed his heart.

On the afternoon of Trent's visit, Adams left his office a little earlier than usual, for he had promised Connie that he would take her to see a new ballet at her favourite music hall. When he reached his house she was already dressed, and while he changed his clothes in his dressing-room, she fluttered restlessly about the upper floor, looking remarkably fresh and pretty in a gown of delicate blossom pink. From a little distance the faint discolour of her skin, the withered lines about her mouth and temples were lost in a general impression of rosy fairness; and as he watched her hurried movements, through the

door of her bedroom, Adams found it almost impossible to associate this sparkling beauty with the half-frenzied creature he had nursed two weeks ago. One of her "spells of joy," as she called them was evidently upon her; and even as he accepted thankfully the startling change in her appearance, there shot into his mind an acute suspicion as to the immediate cause.

"Connie," he said, standing in front of her with his hair brush in his hand, "will you give me your word of honour that you have taken nothing to-day except your proper medicine?"

A quick resentment showed in her eyes, but she veiled it a moment afterward by a cunning expression of injured innocence. "Why, how could I?" she asked, in a hurt voice, "the nurse was with me."

It was true, he knew—the nurse had been with her all day, and yet as he looked more closely at her animated face and brilliant eyes the suspicion hardened to absolute conviction in his mind. The change from the fragile weakness of the morning to this palpitating eagerness could mean only the one thing, he knew—Connie had found some secret way to gratify her craving and the inevitable reaction would set in before many hours.

Turning away again he finished his dressing to the accompaniment of her high-pitched ceaseless prattle. Her conversation was empty and almost inconsequent, filled with rambling descriptions of the newest gowns, with broken bits of intimate personal gossip, but the very rush of words which came from her served to create an atmosphere of merriment at dinner. A little later at the music hall

she insisted upon talking to Adams in exaggerated whispers, until the pointless jokes she made about the arms or the legs of the dancers, sent her into convulsions of noiseless hysterical laughter. Through it all Adams sat patiently wondering whether he suffered more from the boredom of the ballet or from the neuralgia caused by a draught which blew directly on the back of his neck. That the show amused Connie was sufficient reason for sticking it out until the end, but there were moments during the long evening, when he felt, as he sat with his blank gaze fixed upon the glancing red legs on the stage, that every stifled yawn was but an unuttered exclamation of profanity.

"Now really and truly was it worth it?" he asked, with a laugh, when they stood again at their own door.

"But didn't you think it lovely?" enquired Connie, irritably, as she entered the hall and paused a moment under the electric light. The excitement had faded from her face, leaving it parched and wan as from a burned out fire, and the sinister blue shadows had leaped out in the hollows beneath her eyes.

"I think you were," he answered merrily, following her as she turned away and went slowly up the staircase.

A smile at the compliment flickered for an instant upon her lips; then as she reached her bedroom, her strength failed her utterly, and with a little moaning cry she swayed forward and fell in a huddled pink heap upon the floor. As he lifted her she begged piteously for wine—brandy—for anything which would drive away the terrible faintness.

"It is like falling into a gulf," she cried, "I am slipping away and I can't hold myself——"

He measured a dose of cognac and gave it to her with a little water, but when, after swallowing it eagerly, she begged for more, he shook his head and began undressing her as he would have undressed a child. A touch at the bell, he knew, would bring her maid, but a powerful delicacy constrained him as he was about to ring; these were scenes whose very hideousness made them sacred, and with Connie's distracted raving in his ears, he became suddenly thankful for the absolute loneliness, for the empty house around him. As she lay upon the bed where he had placed her, looking, he thought even then, like a crushed blossom in her gown of pale pink chiffon, he bent over her in an anguish of pity which oppressed him like a physical weight. The very hatred in her eyes as she looked up at him made the burden of his sympathy the heavier to bear. Had she loved him it might have been easier for her, but he knew now that in her sanest days she felt no stronger sentiment for him than tolerant gratitude. And during her frantic nights the violence of her detestation was but an added torture. There were times even, and this was so now, when she sought by bodily force to gain possession of the drug which she had hidden under the carpet or beneath the pillows of the couch, and in order to control her struggles, he was obliged to resort to his greater physical strength. After this she looked up and cursed him with a wonderful florid, almost oriental splendour of language, while throwing off his coat.

he brushed from him the hanging shreds of the torn pink chiffon gown.

At seven o'clock in the morning when the nurse came to relieve him, he was still sitting, as he had sat all night, in a chair beside Connie's bed.

"So she has had one of her bad attacks, I feared it," said the nurse, with a sympathetic glance directed less at Connie than at her husband.

"Yes, it was bad," repeated Adams quietly; and then rising to his feet he staggered like a drunken man into his bedroom across the hall. Still wearing his evening clothes he flung himself heavily upon the sofa and fell at once into the profound sleep of acute bodily exhaustion. Two hours later when he awoke to take the coffee which the kindly nurse brought to him, he found that his slumber, instead of refreshing him, had left him sunk in a sluggish melancholy with a clogged and inactive brain.

"She is very quiet now," said the woman, a tall, strong person of middle age, "and strangely enough the spell has hardly weakened her at all—she has had her breakfast and speaks of going out for a little shopping after luncheon."

"Well, that's good news!" exclaimed Adams heartily, as he hastily swallowed his black coffee. Then, holding out his cup to be refilled, he shook his head with the winning humorous smile which was his solitary beauty. "This coffee will have to write two pages in my magazine," he said, "so pour abundantly, if you please."

Sitting there in his dishevelled evening clothes, with his thin, sallow face under his rumpled hair, he made hardly an impressive figure even when viewed

in the effulgent light of romance as a devoted husband. There was nothing of the heroic in his appearance; and yet as the nurse looked down upon him she felt something of the curious attraction he had for men like Arnold Kemper or Perry Bridewell—men whose innate principles of life differed so widely from his own. It was impossible to build a sentimental fiction about him, she thought—he had no place among the broad shouldered, athletic gentlemen who bewitched her in the pages of the modern novel—but she recognised, for the first time, as she stood gravely regarding him, that there could be a love founded upon other attributes than these. To be loved as he loved Connie seemed to her at the instant a very beautiful and perfect thing.

"I think you have suffered more from it than your wife has," she observed, as she replaced the cup upon the tray.

Adams broke into his whimsical laugh. "You don't judge fair," he retorted, "wait until I'm washed and in my right clothes again. If there's anything on earth that turns a man into a corpse, it is an evening suit by daylight."

Then, as she went out with the tray, he endeavoured, while he changed his clothes, to pull himself, by an effort of will, into proper shape to meet the day's work before him.

An hour afterward, as he walked through the morning sunlight to his office, he found that his unusual melancholy had vanished before the first breath of fresh air. A sense of detachment—of world-loneliness came over him as he looked at the passing crowd of strangers, but there was no sadness

in the feeling, for he felt within himself the source as well as the renewal of his peace. He had never regarded himself as what is called a religious man—it was more than ten years since he had entered a church or heard a sermon—yet in this very relinquishment of self, was there not something of the vital principle, of the quickening germ of all great religions? Though he had never said in his thoughts "I believe this" or "I hold by this creed or that commandment," his nature was essentially one in which the intellect must be supreme either for good or for evil; and in his soul, which had been for so long the battlefield of a spiritual warfare, there had dawned at last that cloudless sunrise of faith in which all lesser creeds are swallowed up and lost. If he had ever attempted to put his religious belief into words, he would probably have said with his unfailing humour that it "sufficed to love his neighbour and to let his God alone."

Now, as he passed rapidly through the humming streets, his thoughts were so anxiously engrossed by Connie's condition that, when his name was uttered presently at his elbow, he started and looked up like one awakening uneasily from a dream. The next moment the air swam before him and he felt his blood rush in a torrent from his heart, for the voice was Laura's, and he discovered when he turned that she was looking up eagerly into his face.

"Nothing short of a meditation on the seven heavens can excuse such absorption of mind," she said.

"You came like a spirit without my suspecting that you were near," he answered, smiling.

She laughed softly, giving him her full face as she looked up with her unfathomable eyes and tremulous red mouth. At the first glance he noticed a change in her—an awakening he would have called it—and for a minute he lost himself in a vague surmise as to the cause. Then all other consciousness was swept away by pure delight in the mere physical fact of her presence. For the instant, while they walked together through the same sunshine over the same pavement, she was as much his own as if they stood with each other upon a deserted star.

"It has been so long since I really saw you," she said, after a moment's pause, "I wondered, at first, if you were ill, but had that been so I was sure you would have written me."

Even her voice, he thought, had altered; it was fuller, deeper, more exquisitely vibrant, as if some wonderful experience had enriched it.

"Connie was ill, not I," he answered quietly. "I took her South for a fortnight, and since getting back I've hardly been able to go anywhere except to the office."

She glanced at him with a sympathy in which he detected a slight surprise—for so long as Connie had been well and happy he had rarely mentioned her name even to his closest friends.

"I hope, at least, that she is better by now," responded Laura with conventional courtesy.

"Oh, yes, very much better," he replied; "but tell me of yourself—I want to hear of you. Is there other verse?"

For a minute she looked away to the rapidly moving vehicles in the street; then turning quickly

toward him, she spoke with one of the impulsive gestures he had always found so charming and so characteristic.

"There is no verse—there will never be any more," she said. "Shall I tell you a secret?"

He bent his head. "A dozen if you like."

"Well, there's only one—it's this: I wasn't born to be a poet. It was all a big mistake, and I've found it out in plenty of time to stop. I'd rather do other things, you know; I'd rather live."

"Live," he repeated curiously; and the incidents of his own life flashed quickly, one by one, across his mind. Marriage, birth, death, the illusion of desire, the disenchantment of possession; to place one's faith in the external object and to stake one's happiness on the accident of events—did these things constitute living for such as she?

"When you say 'life' do you not mean action?" he asked slowly.

"Oh, I want to be, to know, to feel," she replied almost impatiently. "I want to go through everything, to turn every page, to experience all that can be experienced upon the earth."

A smile was in his eyes as he shook his head. "And when you have accomplished all these interesting things," he said, "you will have gained from them—what? The lesson, learned perhaps in great sorrow, that the outward events in life are of no greater significance than the falling of the rain on the growing corn. Nothing that can happen or that cannot happen to one matters very much in the history of one's experience, and the biggest incident that ever came since the beginning of the world never brought

happiness in itself alone. It may be," he added, with a tenderness which he made no effort to keep from his voice, "that you will arrive finally at the knowledge that all life is forfeiture in one way or another, and that the biggest thing in it is sometimes to go without."

His tone was not sad—the cheerful sound of it was what impressed her most, and when she looked up at him she was almost surprised by the smiling earnestness in his face.

"Do you mean that this is what you have learned?" she asked.

Her seriousness sent him off into his pleasant laugh. "Whatever I have learned it has not been ingratitude for a meeting like this," he responded gayly. "It is one of my unexpected joys."

"And yet it's a joy that you take small advantage of," she remarked. "I'm almost always at home and I'm very often wishing that you would come. As a last test, will you dine with me to-morrow night?"

While she spoke, for the briefest flicker of her eyelashes, she saw him hesitate; then he shook his head.

"I fear I can't," he replied regretfully, "the nurse goes home, you see, and there's no one left with Connie. When she's well again I'll come gladly if you'll let me."

Her face flushed a little. "I'm sorry I asked you," she said; "I ought to have thought—to have known."

He felt the wrench within him as if he had torn out a living nerve, for it was the end between them and he had meant that it should be so. Life would

have no compromises with illusions, he knew—not even with the last and the most beautiful of desires.

"On the other hand your wish made me very happy," he returned.

She had stopped when they reached a corner, and he realised, with a pang, that the chance meeting was at an end. As she stood there in the pale sunshine, his eyes hung upon her face with an intensity which seemed to hold in it something of the tragedy of a last parting. At the moment he told himself that so far as it lay in his power he would henceforth separate his life from hers; and as he made the resolution he knew that he would carry her memory like a white flame in his heart forever.

An instant afterward he went from her with a smile; and as she turned to look after him, moved by a sudden impulse, she felt a vague stir of pity for the gaunt figure passing so rapidly along the crowded street. While she watched him she remembered that there were worn places on the coat he wore, and with one of the curious eccentricities of sentiment, this trivial detail served to surround him with a peculiar pathos.

CHAPTER VII

In Which Failure is Crowned by Failure

At one o'clock, when Adams left his office to go home to luncheon—a custom which he had not allowed himself to neglect since Connie's illness—he found Mr. Wilberforce just about to enter the building from the front on Union Square.

"Ah, I've caught you as I meant to," exclaimed the older man, with the cordial enthusiasm which Adams had always found so delightful. "It's been so long a time since I had a talk with you that I hope you'll come out somewhere to lunch?"

"I only wish I could manage it," replied Adams, "but I must look in for a minute on Mrs. Adams—she's been ill, you know."

He saw the surprise reflected in his companion's face as he had seen it a little earlier in Laura's; and at the same instant he felt a sensation of annoyance because of his inability to act upon his impulse of hospitality. He would have liked to take Mr. Wilberforce home with him; but remembering the probable quality of the luncheon which awaited him, he repressed the inclination.

"Is that so? I'm sorry to hear it," remarked the other in the conventional tone in which Adams' friends always spoke of Connie. "Well, I'll walk a block or two with you in your direction," he added as they turned toward Broadway. "Laura told me,

by the way, that she was so fortunate as to have a glimpse of you this morning."

Adams nodded and then looked quickly away from the other's searching eyes, "Yes, we met rather early in the street," he responded; "she seems to me to be looking very well, and yet she's altered, somehow—I can't say exactly how or where."

"Then you've noticed it," returned Mr. Wilberforce, with a sigh, and he asked almost immediately: "Does she appear to you to be happier than she was?"

"Happier? Well, perhaps, but I hardly analysed the impression she produced. There was a change in her, that was all I saw."

"Did she speak to you, I wonder, of her book?"

Adams laughed softly. "She spoke of it to say that she was tired of it," he answered, "but that is only the inevitable reaction of youth—it's a part of the universal rhythm of thought, nothing more."

Mr. Wilberforce shook his head a little doubtfully. "I wish I could feel so confident," he returned, while a quick impatience—almost a contempt awoke in Adams' mind. Was it possible that this man beside him, with his white hairs, his blanched skin, his benign old-world sentiments, was, like Trent, a mere worshipper of the literary impulse in its outward accomplishment? Did he love the poet in the woman rather than the woman in the poet? As Adams turned to look at him, he thought, not without a certain grim humour, that he beheld another victim to the vice of sentimentality; and in his mental grouping he placed his companion among those who, like Connie, were in bondage to the images of their imaginations.

"And yet even if she should cease to write poems she will always live one," he added lightly.

"Yes, she will still be herself," agreed Mr. Wilberforce, but his words carried no conviction of comfort; and when he turned at the corner to take his car, it was with the air of a man oppressed by the weight of years.

When Adams reached home he found Connie, dressed in her blue velvet with the little twinkling aigrette, on the point of starting for an afternoon drive with her nurse in the Park. The events of the night had been entirely effaced from her mind by the newer interests of the day; and as he looked at her in amazement, it seemed to him that she bore a greater resemblance to the rosy girl he had first loved than she had done for many weary and heart-sick months. When he left her, presently, to go back to his office, it was with a feeling of hopefulness which entered like an infusion of new blood into his veins. The relapse might have been, after all, less serious than he had at first believed, and Connie's cure might become soon not only a beautiful dream, but an accomplished good. He thought of the sacrifices he had made for it—not begrudgingly, but with a generous thankfulness that he had been permitted to pay the cost—thought of the sleepless nights, the neglected work, the nervous exhaustion which had followed on the broken laws of health. At the moment he regretted none of these things because the end, which he already saw foreshadowed in his mental vision, seemed to him to be only the crowning of his last few weeks. Even the bodily and moral redemption of Connie appeared no longer

difficult in the illumination of his mood; for his compassion, in absorbing all that was vital in his nature, seemed possessed suddenly of the effectiveness of a dynamic force.

"Already she is better," he thought, hopefully; "I see it in her face—in her hands even, and when she is entirely cured the craving for excitement will leave her and we shall be at peace again. Peace will be very like happiness," he said to himself, and then, with the framing of the sentence, he stopped in his walk and smiled. "Peace is happiness," he added after a moment, "for certainly pleasure is not." With the words he remembered the bitter misery of Connie who had lived for joy alone—the utter disenchantment of Arnold Kemper, who had made gratified impulse the fulfilling of his law of life. Back and forth swung the oscillation between fugitive desire and outward possession—between the craving of emptiness and the satiety of fulfilment—and yet where was the happiness of those who lived for happiness alone? Where was even the mere animal contentment? "Is it only when one says to Fate 'take this—and this as well—take everything and leave me nothing. I can do without'—that one really comes into the fulness of one's inheritance of joy? Was this what Christ meant when he said to His disciples 'Seek ye first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added unto you?' In renunciation was there, after all, not the loss of one's individual self, but the gain of an abundance of life."

The afternoon passed almost before he was aware of it, and when he finished his work and drew on his

overcoat, he saw, as he glanced through his office window, that it was already dusk. As he reached the entrance to the elevator, he found Perry Bridewell awaiting him inside, and he kept, with an effort, his too evident surprise from showing in his face.

"Why, this is a treat that doesn't happen often!" he exclaimed with heartiness.

"I was passing and found you were still here, so I dropped in to walk up with you," explained Perry, but there was a note in his voice which caused the other to glance at him quickly with a start.

"Are you ill, old man?" asked Adams, for Perry appeared at his first look to have gone deadly white. "Is there anything that I can do? Would you like to come up and talk things over?"

Perry shook his head with a smile which cast a sickly light over his large, handsome face. "Oh, I'm perfectly well," he responded, "I need to stretch my legs a bit, that's all."

"You do look as if you wanted exercise," commented Adams, as they left the building; "too much terrapin has put your liver wrong, I guess."

At the corner, they passed a news-stand, and as Adams stopped for his evening paper, he noticed again the nervous agony which afflicted Perry during the brief delay.

"Look here, what's up, now?" he enquired, holding his paper in his hand when they started on again, "are you in any trouble and can I help to get you out? I'll do anything you like except play the gallant, and I only draw the line at that because of my temperamental disability. So, something *is* wrong?" he added gayly, "for you haven't even

observed the pretty woman ahead there in the pea-green bonnet."

"Oh, I'm not in any mess just now," replied Perry, with a big, affectionate shake like that of a wet Newfoundland dog.

Adams threw a keener glance at him. "No scrape about a woman, then?" he asked, with the tolerant sympathy which had made him so beloved by his own sex.

"Oh, Lord, no," ejaculated Perry, with a fervour too convincing to be assumed.

"And you haven't lost in Wall Street?"

"On the other hand I made a jolly deal."

"Well, I give it up," remarked Adams cheerfully; then as he spoke, the glare from an electric light fell full upon the headlines of the folded paper in his hand, and he came to a halt so sudden that Perry, falling back to keep step with him, felt himself spinning like a wound up top.

"My God!" said Adams, in a voice so low that it barely reached Perry's ears. An instant later a quick animal passion—the passion of the enraged male—entered into his tone and he walked quickly across the pavement to the sheltering dusk of a cross street. "May God damn him for this!" he cried in a hoarse whisper.

Following rapidly in his footsteps, Perry caught up behind him, and made an impulsive, nerveless clutch at the unfolded paper. "I knew you'd see it; so I wanted to be along with you," he said in a voice like that of a tragic schoolboy.

Adams turned to him immediately, with a restraint which had succeeded his first quivering exclamation.

"So you knew that Brady's wife meant to sue for a divorce?" he asked.

Perry bowed his head—in the supreme crisis of experience he had always found the simple truth to be invested with the dignity of an elaborate lie. "I had heard it rumoured," was what he said.

"And that my wife——"

"I'll swear I never believed it," broke in Perry, with a violent assurance.

From the emotion in his voice one would have supposed him, rather than Adams, to be the injured husband; and the fact was that he probably suffered more at the instant than he had ever done in the whole course of his comfortable life.

"Well, I suppose I ought to be very much obliged to you," replied Adams, with an agonised irony to the injustice of which Perry was perfectly indifferent, "but I can't see that it matters much so long as the thing is true."

"But it's a lie," protested Perry with energy. "I mean the whole damned business."

"What isn't?" demanded Adams bitterly, as he stuffed the crumpled paper into the pocket of his coat. Then, stopping again as they reached a crossing, he held out his hand and enclosed Perry's in a cordial grip.

"I'm very grateful to you," he said; "but if you don't mind, I think I'll walk about a bit alone. I've got to think things over." He hesitated a moment and then added quietly, "I know you'll stand by me whatever comes?"

"Stand by you!" gasped Perry, and the sincere response of his whole impressionable nature brought

two large, round tear drops to his eyes; "by Jove! I'd stand it for you!"

For an instant Adams looked at him in silence, while his familiar smile flickered about his mouth. Then he reached out his hand for another grip, before he turned away and walked rapidly into the dim light of the cross street.

"I must walk about and think things out a bit," he found himself saying presently in his thoughts; "there's a tangle somewhere—I can't pull it out."

Stopping under a light he drew the newspaper from his pocket, but as he unfolded it, one of Connie's wild letters to Brady flashed before his eyes; and crushing the open sheet in his hand, he flung it from him out into the gutter. The darkness afforded what seemed to him a physical shelter for his rage, and as he turned toward it, he felt his first blind instinct for violent action give place to a kind of emotional chaos, in which he could barely hear the thunder of his own thoughts. He knew neither what he believed nor what he suffered; his power to will and his power to think were alike suspended, and he was conscious only of a curious deadness of sensation, amid which his ironic devil, standing apart, asked with surprise why he did not suffer more—why his anger was not the greater, his restraint the less? His philosophy, at the moment, had turned to quicksand beneath his feet; and it was this utter failure of himself which forced upon him the anguish of readjustment, the frenzied striving after a clearer mental vision. As he hurried breathlessly along the narrow, dimly lighted street into which he had turned, he felt instinctively that he was groping

blindly for some way back into his former illumination, for some finer knowledge of spirit, which at present he did not appear to possess. Not to act upon brute impulse, but to listen in agony until he heard the voice of reason above the storm of his passion—until he heard the soul speaking beyond the senses—this was the one urgent need he felt himself to be aware of—the one intelligent purpose that remained with him through his flight.

"No—I have failed and it is all over," was the first distinct thought that he framed. "By her own act she has put the last barrier between us. She is my wife no longer, for, through herself, she has brought disgrace upon us both." Again he remembered the sacrifices he had made for her, not with the generous rejoicing of the morning, but with a fierce bitterness which was like a bodily hurt. "She is no longer my wife," he repeated; "nor am I her husband —for by her own sin she has made me free." Yet the word carried no conviction to his conscience, and he knew, in spite of his assurance, that nothing had happened since yesterday to change the relations between Connie and himself—that if he had pitied her then there was only the double reason why he should pity her now. Had this added wrong made her less helpless? had it put moral fibre into her heart? "All this had happened yesterday—had happened even six months ago, yet last night I sat by her bed—I was filled with sympathy—and was it only because I was in ignorance then of something which I know now? Yesterday I sacrificed for her both my rest and my work, but was she worthier of pity at that hour than she is at this. She has not

changed since, nor has the thing which I have just discovered; it is only I who am different because it is I alone who have come into knowledge of the evil."

He thought of the hideousness of it all—of the punishment that awaited her, of her convulsed face, of her violent gestures, and even of the pale pink chiffon gown, which made her resemble a crushed blossom as she lay upon the bed. That was only last night, and yet in the reality of experience a thousand years had intervened in his soul since then.

The next instant he remembered again, with a throb of exhilaration that he was free. By her own act she had given him back his freedom—she had returned him to his life and to his work. As for her if she chose to fall back into her old bondage, who was there in heaven or on earth that could hold him to account? Every law that had been made by man since the beginning of law was upon his side; and every law declared to him that he was free. Free! The word went like the intoxication of joy to his head; then, even while the exhilaration lasted, he shivered and came abruptly to a halt.

From the light of the crossing a woman had come close to him and touched him upon the arm, making her immemorial appeal with a sickening coquetry in her terrible eyes. She was, doubtless, but the ordinary creature of her class, yet coming as she did upon the brief rapture of his recovered liberty, she appeared as a visible answer to the question he had asked his soul. He shook his head and walked on a few steps; then coming back again he gave her the money that was in his pocket.

"Is this the message?" he put to himself as he

turned away. "Is this the message, or is it only the ugly hallucination of my nerves?" With an effort he sought to shake the image from him, but in spite of his closed mind it still seemed to him that he saw Connie's future looking back at him from the woman's terrible eyes. "And yet what have I to do with that woman or she with Connie?" he demanded. "I have so far as I am aware never injured either in my life, nor by any act of mine have I helped to make my wife what she is to-day—one with that creature in the street and with her kind. The law acquits me. Religion acquits me. My own conscience acquits me more than all." But the argument was vain and empty so long as he saw Connie's future revealed to him through the eyes of the harlot he had left at the crossing. The helplessness of ignorance, of the will that desired to will the good, came over him at the moment and he could have cried aloud in his terror because his soul had reached the boundaries between its angel and its devil. In his decision he appeared to himself to stand absolutely solitary and detached—put away from all help from humanity or from human creeds. The law courts told him nothing, nor did religion—then, at the instant of his sharpest despair of knowledge, there came back to him, as in a vision of light, the scene two thousand years ago in Bethany at the house of Simon the leper. The people passing about him in the street became suddenly but shadows, even the noise of the cars no longer broke in confusion upon his ears; and in the midst of the silence in which he stood, he heard the Voice as Simon had heard it then: "I have somewhat to say unto thee."

A moment afterward the vision was gone, and he looked round him dazed by the flashing of the lights. "What does it matter about my life which is almost over?" he asked. "I will help Connie, so far as I have strength, to bear her sin against me—and as for the rest it is nothing to me any more." Then, as the resolution took shape in his mind, he was conscious of a feeling of restfulness, of a relief so profound that it pervaded him to the smallest fibre of his being. The whole situation had changed at the instant; his offended honour was no longer offended, nor was his righteous anger still righteous. Though the naked truth must face him in all its brutishness, he knew, from the feeling within him, that by an act of thought, which was not an act, he had drawn the sting of the poisoned arrow from his wound. Not only had the bitterness passed from his shame, but there had come, with the relinquishment of the idea of personal wrong, a swift rush of exaltation, like a strong wind, through his soul. Almost unconsciously he had yielded his will into the hands of God, and immediately, as in the prophecy "all these things had been added" unto the rest.

Turning at once he walked rapidly in the direction of his house, while a clock in a tower across the way pointed to the stroke of nine o'clock. The bodily exertion had begun to wear upon him during the last few minutes. His feet ached and there was a bruised feeling in all his muscles. When he came at last to his own door the sensation of fatigue had blotted out the acuteness of his perceptions.

The lights were blazing in the hall; there was

evidently an unusual commotion among the servants; and as he entered, Connie's nurse came to meet him with a white and startled face.

"Have you seen Mrs. Adams?" she asked hastily. "She separated from me in a shop and though I searched for her for hours, I could not find her."

For a breathless pause he stared at her in bewildered horror; then his eyes fell upon a note lying conspicuously on the hall table, and he took it up and tore it open before he answered. The words on the paper were few, and after reading them, he folded the sheet again and replaced it in the envelope. For an instant longer he still hesitated, swallowing down the sensation of dryness in his throat.

"She will not come back to-night," he said quietly at last; "she has gone away for a few days."

Then turning from the vacant curiosity in the assembled faces, he went into his study and shut himself alone in the room in which the memory of his dead child still lived.

CHAPTER VIII

"The Small Old Path"

"Her letters of course gave her away," observed Gerty thoughtfully, as she smoothed her long glove over her arm and looked at Laura with the brilliant cynicism which belonged to her conspicuous loveliness, "Arnold says it is always the woman's letters, and I'm sure he ought to know."

"Why ought he to know?" asked Laura, turning with an impatient movement from the desk at which she sat. Her gaze hung on the soft white creases of kid that encircled Gerty's arm, but there was an abstraction in her look which put her friend at a chilling distance.

Gerty laughed. "Oh, I mean he's a man of the world and they always know things."

For an instant Laura did not respond, and during the brief silence her eyes were lifted from Gerty's arm to Gerty's face. "I sometimes think his worldliness is only a big bluff," she said at last.

"Well, I wouldn't trust his bluff too much, that's all," retorted Gerty.

A smothered indignation showed for a moment in Laura's glance. "But how do you know so much about him?" she demanded.

"I?—oh, I've had my fancy for him, who hasn't? He's like one of those éclair vanille one gets at

Sherry's—they look substantial enough on the surface, but when one sticks in the fork there's nothing there but froth. He's really quite all right, you know, so long as you don't stick in the fork."

"But I thought you liked him!" protested Laura, pushing back her chair and rising angrily to her feet.

"I do—I love him—but that's for myself, darling, not for you."

"Do you mean me to think," persisted Laura in a voice that was tense with horrified amazement, "that you are jealous of *me?*"

A long pause followed her words, for Gerty, instead of replying to the question had turned to the window and was staring out upon the bared trees in Gramercy Park. The quiet of it for the moment was almost like the quiet of the country, and the two women who loved each other seemed suddenly divided by miles of silent misunderstanding. Then, with a resolute movement, Gerty looked full into Laura's face, while the light flashed upon a mist of tears that hung over her reproachful eyes.

"Oh, Laura, Laura!" she said softly.

With a cry of remorse Laura threw herself upon her knees beside the window, kissing the gloved hands in Gerty's lap.

But Gerty had wiped her tears away and sat smiling her little worldly smile of knowledge. "I am jealous of you, but not in the way you meant," she answered. "I am jealous for myself, for the one little bit of me that is really alive—the part of myself that is in you. I am afraid to go over again with you the old road that I went over with

myself—the old wanting, wanting, wanting that ends in nothing."

"But why should I go over it?" asked Laura, from her knees, and the flush in her face coloured all her manner with a fine deception.

Gerty's mocking gayety rang back into her voice. "You might as well ask me why I am still fool enough to be in love with Perry," she returned with her flippant laugh, "it's a part of what Arnold calls 'the damnable contradiction of life.' You might as well ask Connie Adams why she was born bad?"

"Was she—and how do you know it?" demanded Laura.

"I don't know." Gerty's shrug was exquisitely indifferent. "But it's more charitable, I fancy, to suppose so. Have you seen Roger, by the bye?"

Laura shook her head. "I would rather not. There is nothing one could say."

"Oh, I don't know—one might congratulate him on his liberation, and that's something. I dare say he'll have to get a divorce now, though Perry says he hates them."

"Then I don't believe he'll do it, he doesn't live by the ordinary ethics of the rest of us, you know. Will she marry Brady, do you think?"

"Marry Brady? My blessed innocent, Brady wouldn't marry her. He has about as much moral responsibility as a fig tree that puts forth thistles—and besides who could blame him? She's half crazy already from cocaine, and no man on earth could stand her for a month."

No man on earth! Laura leaned back in her chair, closing her eyes, for she remembered the

figure of Roger Adams as he moved away from her through the sunlight in the crowded street. She saw his worn clothes, his resolute walk, and the patience which belonged to the infinite stillness in his face; and, for one breathless moment, she seemed to feel the approach of the spirit which worked silently amid the humming material things that made up life.

Gerty had risen and was fastening her white furs at her throat. "I must go to Camille's," she said, "for she has just got in some new French gowns and she has promised to give me the first look. Of course, one can't really trust her," she added suspiciously, "and I shouldn't be in the least surprised to find that she'd let Ada Lawley get ahead of me. It is simply marvellous how that woman always manages to produce a striking effect. She was at the opera last night in peacock blue when every other woman was wearing that dead, lustreless white. Do you know I sometimes wonder if I follow the fashion almost too closely."

"You could never look like any one else so it doesn't matter."

"And yet I spend two-thirds of my time trying to extinguish the little individuality I possess," laughed Gerty, as she turned upon the threshold. "I wear the same wave in my hair, the same colour in my gown, the same length to my gloves. Oh, you fortunate dear, thank heaven you have never kept a fashion!"

She went out with her softened merriment, while Laura, throwing herself into the chair beside the window, looked down upon the carriage which was

waiting before the door. After a moment she saw Gerty come out and cross the sidewalk, lifting her velvet skirt until she showed a beautifully shod foot and a glimpse of black embroidered stocking. She gave a few careless directions to the footman who arranged her rugs, and then as the carriage door closed, she leaned out with her brilliant smile and waved her hand to Laura at the window above. The winter sunlight seemed to pass away with her when at last she turned the corner.

With a sigh Laura's thoughts followed the carriage, envying the beauty and the fashion of her friend for the first time in her life. A strange fascination enveloped the world in which Gerty lived, and the old familiar atmosphere through which she herself had moved so tranquilly was troubled suddenly as if by an approaching storm. The things which she had once loved now showed stale and profitless to her eyes, while those external objects of fortune, to which she had always believed herself to be indifferent, were endowed at the moment with an extraordinary and unreal value. It was as if her whole nature had undergone some powerful physical convulsion, which had altered not only her outward sensibilities but the obscure temperamental forces which controlled in her the laws of attraction and repulsion. What she had liked yesterday she was frankly wearied of to-day. What she had formerly hated she now found to be full of a mysterious charm. Books bored her, and her mind, in spite of her effort at restraint, dwelt longingly upon the trivial details which made up Gerty's life—upon those bodily adornments on which her friend had staked her

chance of married happiness. The endless round of dressmakers, shops, and feverish emulation appeared strangely full of interest; and her own quiet life showed to her as utterly destitute of that illusory colour of romance which she found in her vision of Gerty's and of every other existence except her own. She beheld her friend moving in a whirl of colour, through perpetual laughter, and the picture fascinated her, though she knew that in the naked reality of things Gerty was far more unhappy than she herself. Yet Gerty's unhappiness appeared to her to be distinguished by the element of poetry in which her own was lacking.

A terrible *ennui* possessed her, the restless desire for a change that would obliterate not only the circumstances in which she was placed, but even the personal fact of her own identity. She wanted an experience so fresh that it would be like a new birth—a resurrection—and yet she could tell neither what this experience would be nor why she wanted it. All that she was clearly aware of was that her surroundings, her family, her friends, the small daily events of her life and her own dissatisfaction, had become stale and repugnant to her mood, and she thought of the day before her as of a gray waste of utterly intolerable hours.

"Nothing will happen in it that has not happened every twenty-four hours since I was born," she said; "it is always the same—everything is the same, and it is this monotony that seems to me insupportable. As I sit here at this window I feel it to be impossible that I should ever drag myself through the remainder of this afternoon, and through the evening which

will be like every other evening that I have spent. Aunt Rosa will repeat her exhaustless jokes, Aunt Angela will make her old complaints, Uncle Percival will begin to play upon his flute." And these things when she thought of them—the stories of Mrs. Payne, the despair of Angela, the piping of Uncle Percival's flute—appeared to her to exact a power of moral endurance which she felt herself no longer to possess. A disgust more terrible than grief seized upon her—a revolt from the commonplace which she knew to be worse than tragedy.

Then in the midst of her depression she remembered that on the following afternoon she would see Arnold Kemper, and the hours appeared instantly to open into the light. The end of everything was there just twenty-four hours ahead, and she felt, like a physical agony, the necessity to stifle the consciousness of time, to kill the minutes, one by one, as they crept slowly into sight. She thought of the meeting in this very room, of the gown that she would wear, of the words that she would speak, of the curious exquisite mixture of attraction and repulsion, of the ardent tenderness she would find in his look. This tenderness, she felt, was the solitary expression of the real man—of the man whom Gerty had never known, whom Madame Alta had not so much as glimpsed; and the assurance produced in her a secret rapture which was all the sweeter for being exclusively her own. She wondered where he was at the instant —how he would pass the hours which dragged so heavily for her—and the interest which had vanished so strangely from her own existence attached itself immediately to his. The people he knew, the club

he went to, even the motor cars he drove, were surrounded in her thoughts with a fresh and vivid charm. Apart from this there was no longer any charm—hardly any animation about the life she led. A single idea had enlarged itself at the cost of all the others, and she had a sense of standing amid a desert waste, in the drab miles of which a solitary palm-tree flourished.

"And yet why should I hunger for his presence and what is there in it when it comes that is worth this wanting?" she asked in dismay of her own longing. "When I am away from him I think of nothing, except of the hour when I shall see him again, and yet when the meeting comes I am not happy and he is always a little different from what I hoped that he would be. I have no particular satisfaction when I see him, but when he goes the longing and the dream begin again and I build up other ideals of him which he will destroy the first time that we come together. Is it because I have never really got to the thing that he is eternally—to the soul of him—that he creates in me this agony of expectancy and of disappointment? When I meet him to-morrow may it not happen that for the first time he will fulfill all the ideals of him that I have made?"

And it seemed to her almost impossible that she should wait the twenty-four intervening hours before making her final discovery—that she should exist a day and a night in utter vacancy while the ultimate moment still beckoned her from to-morrow. Would time never pass? Was there no way of strangling it before it came to birth? She picked up her favourite books from her desk—Spinoza, Shelley, "The Imitation

of Christ"—but the throbbing vitality in her own breast caused the printed pages to turn chill and lifeless.

A mirror was placed over the mantel and she looked closely into it, meeting her profound gaze and the poetic charm which hung like an atmosphere about her delicate figure. She felt at the instant that she would have given her life—her soul even and its infinite possibilities—for an exterior of Gerty's brilliant beauty. The blackness of her hair, the prominence of her brow, the faint amber pallor of her skin, provoked her into a sensation of anger; and she turned away with an emotion that was almost one of bitterness. A minute later it seemed to her that the afternoon would pass more quickly if she spent it out of doors, and as she slipped into her walking clothes she thought with relief of the crowded streets and of the noises that would drown the consciousness of her own thoughts. When Angela called to her as she passed along the hall it was with a movement of irritation that she turned the handle of the door and entered the invalid's room, where the pale winter sunshine fell over the tall white candles and uncarpeted floor.

Mrs. Payne, in her black velvet and old rose point, sat by the window reading aloud in her shrill voice extracts from a society paper which she had brought for the purpose of entertaining her sister. In the conventual atmosphere in which Angela lived the biting scandals and malicious gossip of the worldly old woman always produced upon Laura an impression of mere vulgar insincerity. To have lived over seventy years and still to find one's chief interest in the social

indiscretions of one's neighbours was a fact which would have been pathetic had it been less ridiculous. Tottering reluctantly to her grave, in the centre of a universe filled with a million mysteries of dead and living suns, she was absorbed to the exclusion of all larger matters in the question as to whether or not "Tom Marbury had compromised Mrs. Billy Pearce?"

"As if it mattered," sighed Angela from her couch. "As if it really mattered to me in the least."

Mrs. Payne fixed upon her a painted pair of eyes set in lustreless vacancy between two flashing diamond earrings. "That's because you live so out of the world, my dear," she observed, "that you have ceased to feel any longer a rational interest in life."

"But is life all somebody's impropriety?" enquired Angela, with the meekness of a child.

"It is that—or charities," returned Mrs. Payne. "You may take your choice between the two. It was only after I failed to interest you in our day nursery that I turned to the social news."

"But you haven't tried the sports," suggested Laura, with a laugh, while she felt the presence of her aunts to have become an intolerable burden.

Mrs. Payne raised her blackened eyebrows, and sat smoothing out the crumpled paper with her claw-like jewelled fingers. It seemed to Laura that she wore her body to-day as if it were a tattered, yet industriously mended garment for which her indomitable spirit would soon have no further use. Everything about her was youthful except the flesh which wrapped her, and that was hideously, was grotesquely ancient. Yet she had once been both a

beauty and a belle, famed for her quick affairs and her careful indiscretions; and as Laura watched her she saw in this living decay but the inevitable end and weariness of pleasure. Of her many lovers, which remained to her to-day? With the multiplied sensations of her youth what had her loveless age to do? She had hardly laid up even a sweetness of memories, or why did she feast upon uncovered scandals as a vulture upon carrion?

"What poor dear Angela needs is an object in life—a passion," remarked Mrs. Payne, picking up her gold-rimmed eye glasses which hung on a little jewelled chain from her bosom. "I used to say that when I got too old for an emotion I wanted to be chloroformed, but I found, thank heaven, that with care one's emotions may last one pretty well to one's eightieth year. When men fail one cards are left, and after cards, I daresay, there would come gossip. It is for this reason," she pursued with conviction, "that I am trying to persuade Angela to take up a little bridge."

"A little bridge!" gasped Laura, and from sheer amazement she sat down on the foot of Angela's couch.

"I was considering the moral support of it, of course," resumed Mrs. Payne. "First of all I would advise some inspiring religious conviction, but as religion does not appeal to her, I suggested bridge."

"It might as well be white rabbits, I don't see the difference," protested Angela, rolling over upon her side with a despairing movement of fatigue.

"The difference, my dear, is that white rabbits are dirty little beasts," observed the elder woman.

Angela lay back upon her sofa and regarded her sister with a smile sharp and cold as the edge of a knife. "I wonder why you were more fortunate than I, Rosa," she said, after a pause, "for in my heart I was always a better woman."

Mrs. Payne laughed her hard little mirthless laugh, and stretched out her withered hand with a melodramatic gesture. "But I was never a fool, my dear," was her retort, "and there are few women of whom it can be said with truth that they were never at any time, from the beginning to the end of their career, a fool. Nobody is a fool always, but there are very few people who escape it throughout their lives."

"Oh, I was," sighed Angela submissively, "I know it, but I was punished."

"It is the one thing for which we can count quite certainly upon being punished in this life," remarked Mrs. Payne, with a kind of moral satisfaction, as of one who was ranged upon the side of worldliness if not of righteousness. "Other sins are for eternity, I suppose, but I have never yet seen a fool escape the deserts of his folly. It is the one reason which has always made me believe so firmly in an overruling Providence. Are you going out, my child?" she asked, as Laura rose.

"I am stifling for want of air," replied the girl, shrinking away from the unnatural flash of her aunt's eyes. "I'll read to aunt Angela when I come in, but just now I must get out." Then as Mrs. Payne still sought to detain her, she broke away and ran rapidly down into the street.

But she was no sooner out of doors than it seemed

to her that she ought to have stayed in her room—that the minutes would have passed more swiftly in unbroken quiet. Her senses were absorbed in the single desire to have the day over—to begin to-morrow; and it seemed to her that when once the night was gone, she would be able to collect her thoughts with clearness, that the morning would bring some lucid explanation of the disturbance that she felt to-day. Then it occurred to her that she would follow Gerty's example and seek a distraction in the shops, and she took a cab and drove to her milliner's, where she tried on a number of absurdly impossible hats. She bought one at last, to realise immediately as she left the shop that she would never persuade herself to wear it because she felt that it gave her an air of Gerty's "smartness" which sat like an impertinence upon her own individual charm. Glancing at her watch she found that only two hours had gone since she left the house, and turning up the street she walked on with a step which seemed striving to match in energy her rapid thoughts.

"You have effaced every other impression of my life," he had said to her yesterday; and as she repeated the words she remembered the quiver of his mouth under his short brown moustache, the playful irony of the smile that had met her own. Had he meant more or less than the spoken phrase? Was the strength of his handclasp sincere? Or was the caressing sound of his voice a lie, as Gerty believed? Was he, in truth, fighting under all the shams of life for the liberation of his soul? or was there only the emptiness of sense within him, after all? She felt his burning look again, and flinched at the memory. "Every

glance, every gesture, every word speaks to me of things which he cannot utter, which are unutterable," and yet even with the assurance she felt as if she were living in an obscure and painful dream—as if the element of unreality were a part of his smile, of his voice, of the feverish longing from which she told herself that she would presently awake. It was as if she moved an illusion among illusions, and yet felt the unreal quality of herself and of the things outside.

CHAPTER IX

The Triumph of the Ego

He came punctually at three o'clock on the following afternoon, and even as he entered the room, she was conscious of a slight disappointment because, in some perfectly indefinable way, he was different from what she had hoped that he would be.

"This is the first peaceful moment I have had for twenty-four hours," he remarked, as he flung himself into a chair before the small wood fire; "a man I knew was inconsiderate enough to die and make me the guardian of his son, and I've had to overhaul the chap's property almost before the funeral was over."

A frown of nervous irritation wrinkled his forehead, but as he turned to her it faded quickly before the kindling animation in his look. "By Jove, I've thought of you every single minute since I was here," he pursued. "What a persistent way you have of interfering with a fellow's peace of mind. I've known nothing like it in my life."

"I hope at least I didn't damage the property," she observed, and almost with the words she wondered why she had longed so passionately yesterday for his presence. Now that he had come she felt neither the delight of realised expectation nor the final peace of renouncement.

"Well, it wasn't your fault if you didn't," he replied, leaning his head against the chair-back and looking at her with his intimate and charming smile. "I had to fight hard enough to keep you out even of the stocks. Was I as much in your way, I wonder?"

She shook her head. "In my way? I wouldn't allow it. Why should I?"

"Why, indeed?" his genial irony was in his glance and he held her gaze until she felt the warm blood mount swiftly to her forehead. "Why, indeed unless you wanted to?" he laughed.

His eyes moved to the window, and she followed the large, slightly coarsened features of his profile and the fullness of his jaw which lent a suggestion of brutality to his averted face. Was it possible that she found an attraction in mere animal vitality? She wondered; then his caressing glance was turned upon her, and she forgot to ask herself the useless question.

"So I must presume, then, that I haven't disturbed you?" he enquired gayly.

Her eyes lingered upon him for a moment before she answered. "Oh, no, it wasn't you, it was Gerty," she replied.

He drew nearer until the arm of his chair touched her own. "I thought at least that my character was safe with Gerty," he exclaimed, not without the annoyance of an easily aroused vanity.

"I don't know what you'd think about the danger," she returned with seriousness, "but I simply hate the kind of things she told me."

His frown returned with gathered energy. "Is that so? What were they?"

"Oh, I don't know—nothing definite—but about women generally."

"Women! Pshaw! You're the only woman. There isn't any other on the earth."

Her hand lay on the arm of her chair, and he reached out and grasped her wrist, not gently, but with a violent pressure. "I'll swear there isn't another woman in existence," he exclaimed.

An electric current started from his fingers through the length of her arm; she felt it burning into her flesh as it travelled quickly from her wrist to her heart. For one breathless moment she was conscious of his presence as of a powerful physical force, and the sensation came to her that she was being lifted from her feet and swept blindly out into space. Then, drawing slightly away, she released herself from his grasp.

"I give you fair warning that if you repeat that for the third time, I shall believe it," she retorted coolly.

"I'm trying to make you," he returned in a strained voice. "Why are you such a sceptic, I wonder," he added as he fell back into his chair. "Can't you tell the real thing when you come across it?"

"The real thing?" Her words were almost a whisper.

"Are you so used to shams that you don't recognise a man's love when you see it?"

She leaned toward him, her black brows drawn together with the sombre questioning look which had always fascinated him by its strangeness. Beyond the look, what was there? he asked with an intense and eager curiosity. What passionate surprises ex-

isted in her? What secret suggestions of a still undiscovered charm? The wonder of her temperament rose before him, exquisite, remote, alluring, and he felt the appeal she made thrill like the spirit of adventure through his blood. Again he stretched out his hand, but with a frown he drew it back before it touched her.

"Can't you see that I love you?" he said with an angry hoarseness.

His face, his voice, the gesture of his outstretched hand startled her into a quick feeling of terror, and she shrank back with a childlike movement of alarm. Where was her dream, she demanded with an instinctive repulsion, if this was the only living reality of love? Then his face changed abruptly beneath her look, and as the strong tenderness of his smile enveloped her, she was conscious of a sudden ecstasy of peace.

"Did I frighten you?" he asked, smiling.

She shook her head, resting her fingers for an instant upon his hand. "I don't believe you could frighten me if you tried," she answered.

He raised his eyebrows with his characteristic blithe interrogation, "Well, I shouldn't like to try, that's all."

"I give you leave—my courage is my shield."

"But I don't want to frighten you." His voice was softer than she had ever heard it. "We aren't afraid of those we love, you know."

"Why should I love you?" she enquired gayly.

His pleasant irony was in his laugh. "Because you can't help yourself—you're obliged to—it's your fate."

She frowned slightly. "I have no fate except the one I make for myself."

He bent toward her and this time his hand closed with determination upon hers. "Well, you may make me what you please," he said.

Her hand fluttered like an imprisoned bird in his grasp, but he held it with a pressure which sent the blood tingling sharply to the ends of her fingers. His strength hurt her and yet she found a curious pleasure in the very acuteness of her sensations.

"There's no use fighting," he said with a short laugh, "we can't help ourselves. You'll have to marry me, so you may as well give in."

His tone was mocking, but she felt his tenderness as she had felt it a moment before, resistless and enveloping. As she smiled up at him, he bent quickly forward and kissed her brow and eyes and mouth, then lifting her chin he kissed, also, the soft fulness of her throat. When she put up her hands in protest, he crushed them back upon her bosom by the strength of his lips.

She closed her eyes, yielding for one breathless instant to the passion of his embrace. Her dream and her longing melted swiftly into realisation, and she told herself that the agony of joy was sharper than that of grief. This was like nothing that she had imagined, and she felt an impulse to fly back into the uncertainty that she had left—to gain time in which to prepare for the happiness which she told herself was hers. Yet was it happiness? Her soul trembled as if from some almost imperceptible shock of disillusionment, and she knew again the sense of unreality which had come

to her in the street on the day before. Again she felt that she was in the midst of a singularly vivid dream from which she would presently awake to life—and this dream seemed the result of her dual nature, as if even her emotions belonged less to her real existence than to an unconscious projection of thought.

The impulse to escape re-awoke in her, and yet she was clearly aware that she would no sooner fly from him than her insatiable longing would drive her back anew. His attraction appeared strangely the greater as she withdrew the further from his actual presence, and she knew that if he were absent from her for a day the uncertainty that he aroused would become intolerable. "Does the soul that I see in him—the soul of which mine is but the reflection —really exist, or have I created an image out of mere emptiness?" she asked; and even with the thought it seemed to her that she saw a new seriousness—a profounder meaning in his face. Gerty had never touched the hidden springs, nor had any other woman except herself, and the knowledge of this gave her an ecstatic consciousness of power.

When she raised her eyes she saw that he had fallen back into his chair and was watching her intently with a puzzled and ardent look.

"You won't keep me hanging on for an eternity," he said, with the nervous contraction of his forehead she knew so well. "If we must go to the scaffold, let's go at once."

"To the scaffold?" She smiled at him for the purpose of prolonging the thrill of the uncertainty.

"Oh, I hate marriage, you know," he returned

impatiently, "there's not another woman on earth who could get me into it."

She nodded. "Well, that is to be hoped if not believed."

He made an impulsive movement toward her. "Believe it or not, so long as you marry me," he exclaimed.

His flippancy grated upon her, and she turned from his words to the elusive earnestness which mocked at her from his face. If she might only arrest and hold this earnestness, then surely she might reach the depths of his nature and be at peace.

"It never seemed possible to me that I should marry a man who has had another wife," she said, with an emotion which was almost a regret for the old ideal of conduct from which she had slipped away.

"A wife! Nonsense!" She saw the indignant flash of his eyes and the nervous quiver of the hand with which he pulled at his short moustache. Though he did not touch her she felt instinctively that his personality had been put forth to overmaster her. "She was nothing but a schoolboy's folly, and I've forgotten that I ever knew her. She's safely married again now, so for heaven's sake, don't be foolish!"

"And how do you know that in ten years you will not have forgotten me?" she asked.

For a brief pause he did not reply; then he bent toward her and she hung for a rapturous instant upon the passionate denial in his face. The look that she loved and dreaded was in his eyes, and she struggled blindly in her own helplessness before it. He was so close to her that it seemed as if the breath were

leaving her body in the intensity of the atmosphere she breathed.

"Forget you, my own sweetheart!" he exclaimed, and the trivial words were almost an offence against the emotional dignity of the moment.

She rose to her feet, stretching out her hand until she stood as if keeping him at a distance by the mere fragile tips of her fingers.

"If I love you, I shall love you very, very much," she said.

With a laugh he bent his lips against her hand, "You'll never love me half so much as I love you, you bit of thistledown," he answered.

"It will be either a great happiness or a greater misery," she went on, hesitating, retreating, as she withdrew her hands and pressed them upon her bosom.

"There's no misery any more—it is the beginning of life," he rejoined.

She laughed softly, a little tender, yielding laugh; then at the very instant when he would have caught her in his arms, she slipped quickly back until her desk came between them.

"You must give me time—I must think before I let myself care too much," she said.

In the end she gave him her promise and he went from her with a rare and vivid feeling of exhilaration. For the time he told himself that he wanted her more than he remembered ever to have wanted anything in his whole life; and his sated emotion of a man of pleasure, responded with all the lost intensity of youth. Was it credible that he was already middle-aged—was already growing a little bald? he

demanded, with a genuine delight in the discovery that his senses were still alive.

On his way up to his rooms, he dropped, by habit, into his club, and after a word or two with several men whom he seldom met, he crossed over to join Perry Bridewell, who sat in an exhausted attitude in a leather chair beside the window. Outside a stream of carriages, containing richly dressed women moved up Fifth Avenue, dividing as it approached the mounted police at the corner, and Perry, as Kemper went up to him, was following with a dulled fish-like glance the pronounced figure of a lady who held the reins over a handsome pair of bays.

"That's a fine figure of a woman—look at her hips," he observed, with relish, as Kemper stopped beside him.

"I saw her yesterday. Gerty says she's terrific form," commented Kemper, gazing to where the object of their admiration vanished in a crush of vehicles.

"Oh, they always say that of a woman with any figure to speak of," remarked Perry. "Unless she's as flat as an ironing board, somebody is sure to say she's vulgar. For my part I like shape," he concluded with emphasis.

A vision of Gerty's slender, almost boyish figure, with its daring carriage, rose before Kemper, and he bit back the cynical laugh upon his lips. Did one require, after all, a certain restraint in life, a cultured abstinence before one could really appreciate the finer flavour of the æsthetic taste? His old aversion to marriage returned to him as he looked at Perry, sunk in his domestic satiety, and his exhilaration of a

moment ago gave place to a corresponding degree of depression. He had done the irrevocable thing, and, as usual, it was no sooner irrevocable than the joyous seduction of it fled from his fancy. Marriage was utterly repugnant to him, and yet he knew not only that there was no withdrawing from his position, but that he would not wish to withdraw himself if he had the power. The instant that the possibility of losing Laura occurred to him, he felt again the full, resurgent wave of his desire. He wanted her, and if to marry her was the one way to possess her, then— the devil take it—marry her he would!

A tinted note was brought to Perry Bridewell, who, after reading it, sat twirling it between his fingers with a bored and discontented look on his handsome florid face.

"Take my advice, and when you get clear of an affair, keep out," he remarked, in a disgusted voice. "By Jove, I'm sometimes tempted to wish that I were as cold blooded as old Adams."

"Old Adams?" Kemper repeated the name, with a quickened interest. "Well, I'd hardly envy him his experience with the sex," he exclaimed.

"You would if you saw him—he simply never thinks about a woman so far as I know, and at least he's well enough rid of his wife, at last. She's on Brady's hands, thank heaven!"

Kemper shrugged his shoulders. "It serves her right, I suppose, but I shouldn't care to be on Brady's hands, that's all."

"Oh, he'll chuck her presently, you'll see."

"And afterward——" Kemper was leaning over

Perry while he critically examined a pretty woman who was passing under the window.

"There's no afterward," laughed Perry; "you know how such women end."

As he glanced at the note again, the bored and discontented look came back upon his face, and he tore the envelope carelessly across and flung it with a jerk into the waste basket.

"Pshaw! it's all a confounded nuisance—the whole business of sex," he remarked as he rose to his feet. Then while the disgust still lingered in his expression, a servant entered and handed him a second note written upon the same faintly tinted paper. Immediately as if by magic his face was transfigured by the animated satisfaction of the conqueror, and instinctively his hand wandered to the ends of his fair moustache, to which he added an eloquent upward twirl. From the condition of a mere sullen and dejected animal—he sprang instantly into the victorious swagger of the complacent male.

"Sorry, but I'm in an awful hurry," he remarked in his usual hearty voice. "Look me up later in the evening and we'll have a game of billiards."

He went out, still twirling the fine ends of his moustache, and Kemper followed, after a short delay, to where his newest French motor car was waiting before the door.

A little later as he moved slowly amid the crush of vehicles in Fifth Avenue, it occurred to him that since Perry was so agreeably engaged, he might himself come in for a share of Gerty's society, and stopping before her door, he sent up a request that she would come with him for a short quick run up

Riverside. Next to Laura herself he felt that he preferred Gerty because he knew that she would enter into a lively banter upon the subject that filled his thoughts, and his emotion was so fresh that there was a piquant charm in her sprightly allusion to the mere fact of its existence. When she came down at the end of a few minutes, wearing her long tan motoring coat and a fluttering white chiffon veil, he felt a quick impatience of the first casual phrases with which she leaned back in the car and settled her hanging draperies about her.

"Go as fast as you like," he said to the chauffeur, and then reaching into his pocket, he drew out his glasses and offered her a pair.

She shook her head, with an indignant gesture of refusal. "If I perish I perish, but I won't perish hideously!" she exclaimed.

With a laugh he slipped the elastic over his cap. "What a bore it must be always to keep beautiful," he remarked. "You can't imagine the positive delight there is in the freedom of ugliness."

"I dare say." She had turned her head to look at a passing carriage, and he saw the lovely delicacy of her profile through the blown transparent folds of her veil. "I shall know it some day," she added presently, "for after I've safely passed my fiftieth birthday, I mean never to look into a glass again. Then I'll break my mirrors and be really happy."

"No, you won't, my dear cousin," he rejoined, "for you'll continue to see yourself in Perry's eyes."

He watched with a sensation of pleasure the graceful shrug of her shoulders under her shapeless coat.

"Oh, there's no chance of that," she assured him; "he is always in them himself?"

The vague curiosity in his thoughts took form suddenly in words. "Where's he now, by the way, do you know?"

Her musical, empty laugh was as perfect as the indifferent glance she gave him. "Enjoying himself, I hope," she answered. "He hung around me until I sent him out in the sheer desperation of weariness."

Though her lashes did not quiver, he knew not only that she lied, but that she was perfectly aware of the assurance and extent of his knowledge. The hopeless gallantry of her deception appealed to the fighting spirit in his blood, and he found himself wondering foolishly if Laura could have played with so high an air the part of a neglected wife. To a man of his peculiarly eager temperament there existed a curious fascination in the idea of pushing to its limit of endurance an unalterable constancy. Would Laura have uttered her futile lies with so exquisite an insolence? or would she have acted in tears the patient Griselda in her closet? The virtue of truthfulness was the one he had most nearly associated with her, and it seemed to him impossible that she should stoop to shield herself behind a falsehood. Yet he could not dispel his curiosity as to how she would act in circumstances which he felt to be impossible and purely imaginary.

He wanted to speak of her to Gerty, but a restraint that was almost embarrassment kept him silent, and Gerty herself could not be induced to abandon her flippant satirical tone. So Laura was not mentioned

between them; and he felt when at last he brought Gerty to her door again that, on the whole, the drive had been a disappointment. He had meant to seek her sympathy with his love for her friend, and instead he had been met by a fine, exquisite edge of cutting humour. For once he had felt the need to be wholly in earnest, and Gerty had taken nothing seriously, least of all the hint which he had dropped concerning the ultimate stability of his emotion. If she had got her heartache from his sex, he saw clearly that she meant to have her laugh on it as well; and the only remark from which she had let fall even momentarily her gay derision was in answer to some phrase of his in which had occurred the name of Roger Adams.

"Roger Adams!" she had echoed with a fleeting earnestness, "do you know I've always had a fancy that he is meant for Laura in another life."

"In another life?" he questioned merrily.

"Oh, things went crosswise here, you see," she answered, "but somewhere else, who knows? They may all be straightened out."

The question of Laura's possible fate in "another life" failed somehow to disturb him seriously; but as he drove presently down the darkening street, under the high electric lights, he found himself wondering vaguely why Gerty had so persistently associated her friend with Roger Adams.

CHAPTER X

In Which Adams Comes Into His Inheritance

Five minutes had hardly passed after Laura was alone before the servant brought up the name of Roger Adams, and an instant later he was holding her hand in his cordial grasp. At his appearance she had for a moment a sense of the returning reality of things—the vigour of his hand clasp, the strong, kindly look of his face, the winning, protective tenderness of his smile, these gave her an impression of belonging to the permanent instead of to the merely evanescent part of life. When he sat down in the big leather chair from which Kemper had risen, and removing his glasses, fixed upon her the attentive gaze of his narrow, short-sighted eyes, she felt immediately the first sensation of peace that she had known for many weeks. His hand, long, heavily veined, muscular, and yet finely sensitive, lay outstretched upon the mahogany lid of her desk, and she found herself presently contrasting it with the square, brown, roughly shaped hand of Kemper. Her senses, her brain, her heart were still full of her lover, yet she was able to feel through some strange enfranchisement of her dual nature, that there was a mental directness, an impassioned morality about the man she did not love in which the man she loved was entirely lacking. But the knowledge of this

curiously enough, served to increase rather than to diminish the persistent quantity of her emotion, and the few minutes during which Kemper had been absent from her had sufficed to exaggerate his image to a statue that was heroic in its proportions. It was as if her heart—she was still lucid enough to think in a figure of speech—were an altar dedicated to the perpetual flame before a deity who had already showed himself to be both terrible and obscure.

Now as she sat looking, with her rapt gaze, at the man before her, she was thinking how absolutely and without reservation was her surrender to those particular qualities which Roger Adams did not represent. Here, at this approaching crisis in her experience, it might have been supposed that her sense of humour would have lent something of its brilliance as a safeguard, but the weakness of her temperament lay in the very fact that her humour entered only into those situations where it could ornament without modifying the actual conditions of thought—that she devoted to her passion for Kemper, as to the other merely temporary phenomena of the senses, a large intensity of outlook which only the eternal could support with dignity.

Her gaze dropped back from the heights, and he felt that she became less elusive and more human.

"I've thought of you so often and so much," she remarked with her smile of cordial sweetness.

"Not so often as I've thought of you." He laid, as he spoke, a folded paper upon the desk, "There's an English review of the poems. It's rather good so I thought you might care to see it."

She unfolded the paper; then pushed it from her

with an indifferent gesture. "It seems so long ago I can hardly believe I wrote them," she returned, conscious as she uttered the mere ordinary words of a subdued yet singularly vivid excitement, which seemed the softer mental radiance left by an illumination which was past.

"I wonder why it should seem long to you," said Adams slowly. "I remember you used to complain that one was obliged to fly through phases of thought in order to test them all."

"I'm not sure that I want to test them all now," she replied. "When one gets to a good place one would better stop and rest."

"Then you are in a good place?" he asked, looking at her intently from his short-sighted eyes, which appeared to contract and narrow since he had taken off his glasses.

"I don't know," she evaded the question with a smile, "but if I am, I warn you, I shall stand still and rest."

He laughed softly. "I dare say you're right, if there's such a state as rest on the earth," he answered.

The cheerful sound of his voice brought the tears suddenly to her eyes, and she remembered a man whom she had once seen in a hospital, smiling after a frightful accident through which he had passed.

"Are you yourself so tired?" she asked.

"I?" he shook his head. "Oh, I was using the glittering generalities again."

"And yet you seldom take even the smallest of vacations," she insisted.

"One doesn't need it when one is broken in as

I am. There's a joy in getting one's work behind one that the luxury of idleness does not know."

"All the same I wish you'd stop awhile." Then she gave him one of her long, thoughtful looks and spoke with the beautiful, vibrant note in her voice which he had called its "Creole quality." "We have been such old, such close, such dear friends," she went on, "that I wonder if I may tell you how profoundly—how sincerely——"

She faltered and he took up her unfinished sentence with the instinct to put her embarrassment at ease. "I knew it all along, God bless you," he said. "One feels such things, I think."

"One ought to," she responded.

"It's been hard," he pursued frankly; and she was struck by the utter absence of picturesqueness, of the whining tone of the victim in his treatment of the situation. There was no appeal to her sympathy in his manner, and he impressed her suddenly as a man who had come into possession of a power over the results of events if not over the passage of events themselves. "It's been harder, perhaps, than I can say—poor girl," he added quickly.

With a start she sat erect in her chair. "And you can stop to think of her?" she demanded.

The hand lying on the arm of his chair closed and unclosed itself slowly, without effort. "Can't you?" he asked abruptly.

"Not sincerely, not naturally," she answered. "I think of you."

She saw a spasm of pain pass suddenly into his face, a too ardent leaping, as it were, of the blood.

"You would understand things better," he said

presently, after a pause in which she felt that she had witnessed a quick, sharp struggle, "if you had ever watched the slow moral poisoning of cocaine—or had ever been," he added with a harsh, grating sound in his usually quiet voice, "at the mercy of such a damned brute as Brady."

His sudden rage shook her like a strong wind, and she liked him the better for his relapse into an elemental passion in the cause of righteousness.

"I'm glad you cursed him," she remarked simply. "I like it!"

He smiled a little grimly. "So do I."

"And yet how terrible it is," she said, with an effort to work herself into a sentiment of pity for Connie which she did not feel. "It makes the whole world look full of horror."

"Well, it's a comfort to think I never argued that it wasn't a hard road," he returned, with the whimsical humour which seemed only to deepen her sense of tragedy. "I've merely maintained that the only excuse for living is to make it a little easier."

He rose as he spoke and held out his hand with a smile. "So long as you're happy, don't bother to think of me," he said; "but if there ever comes a time when you need a sword-arm, let me know."

Would she ever find that she had need of him? he asked himself presently as he walked rapidly homeward through the streets. Was it in the remotest probability of events that he should ever know the delight of putting forth his full strength in her service? Like a beautiful dream the thought stayed by him for many minutes, and his mind dwelt upon it as upon some rare, cherished vision that

lies always behind the actual energies of life. He thought of her dark, eloquent eyes, of the imaginative spirit in her look, and of that peculiar blending of strength with sweetness which he had found in no woman except herself. It was a part of the power she exercised that in thinking of her the physical images appeared always to express a quality that was not in themselves alone.

Then, because he must let her go forever, he set himself patiently to detach her presence from his memory. To think of her had become, he knew, the luxury of weakness, and in order to test his strength for renouncement, he brought his mind deliberately to bear upon the immediate necessity before him. It was useless to say to himself that he could as soon give up his dream as his desire. The endurance of his will, he realised, was equal to whatever sacrifice he was called upon to make and live.

"I can do without—take this—take all and leave me nothing," he had said in the hour of his deepest misery; and with the knowledge of his strength to renounce all that which lay outside himself had come also the knowledge of his power to possess whatever was within his soul. Life was forfeiture and he had given up the world that he might gain himself. Since the night when he had distractedly sought God through the city, he had become gradually aware that he moved in the midst of a large unspeakable peace, for in willing as God willed he had entered, he found, into a happiness which was independent and almost oblivious of the external tragedy in which he lived. Neither sickness nor poverty, nor the shame

of Connie's sin, nor the weakness of his own flesh, had power to separate him from the wisdom which had come to him under the eyes of the harlot at the crossing. In seeking the essential thing he had wandered for years in a circle which had led him back at last to his own soul. Beyond this, he saw there was little further to be lost and nothing to be learned. "Give me more light, my God!" he had prayed in agony of spirit; and the answer had come in a mental illumination which had made the crooked places plain and the obscure meanings clear. At last he was happy, for at last he had learned that the man who loses all else and has God possesses everything.

His loneliness—surely there was never a man more alone since the beginning of time—had failed suddenly to disquiet him; and as he looked from his remote vision upon the people about him, there flowed through his mind that ultimate essence of knowledge which enables a man to recognise himself when he encounters the stranger in the street.

Several weeks later he heard from Gerty Bridewell of Laura's engagement to Arnold Kemper. He had dropped in to see Perry one afternoon upon an insignificant piece of business, and Gerty in her husband's absence, had insisted upon receiving his call.

"I'll reward you with a bit of news," she said, with a nervous and troubled gesture. "Laura will be married in the autumn."

"Married?" He looked at her a little blankly, for after having armoured himself to meet an expected blow, he was almost surprised to find that he was not insensible to the shock. "Married! and to whom?"

"To Arnold, of course. Didn't you suspect that it would happen?"

He shook his head. "Of all men he's the last I'd ever have thought of." With the words a vision of Kemper rose before him, robust, virile, sensual, with his dominant egoism and his pleasant affectations, half hero and half libertine.

"Well, of all men he's probably the only one that could have done it," replied Gerty; "he's positively wild about her, there's some comfort to be got from that—and Laura——"

"And Laura?" he repeated the name for she had broken off quickly after having uttered it.

"Oh, Laura is very much in love, it seems. I don't believe she herself knows exactly why—but then one never does."

"Well, let's wish them happiness with all our hearts," he said, and added a little wistfully, "If it could only come by wishing."

"Ah, if it could!" was Gerty's plaintive echo; then her voice dropped into a sigh of perplexity, and she leaned toward him in a flattering confidential manner. "Do you know there are some men who are cads only in their relations to women," she observed; "leave out that element from their make-up and they're all round first-rate fellows."

"I dare say you're right," he answered, and thought of Perry Bridewell, "but why do you select this instant," he added humorously, "to formulate your philosophy of sex?"

Her earnestness fled and she leaned back in her chair laughing. "Oh, I don't know—perhaps—because one doesn't like to lose an aphorism

even if it pops into one's head at the wrong time."

Then as he rose to go she pressed his hand with a grip that was almost boyish. "How I wish you liked me half as much as I like you," she said.

"I do—I shall always," he responded in his whimsical manner. "There's absolutely no limit to my liking—only I know it would be the surest way to bore you to death."

She laughed a little wearily. "It would be so nice to be really liked," she pursued. "Nobody likes me. A good many have loved me in one way or another, but I want to be just liked."

He saw the pathetic little frown gather between her brows, and in spite of the pain in his own heart, he felt a profound and pitiful sympathy. "Well, we'll make a compact upon it," he declared, holding her hand for an instant in his hearty grasp. "I promise to like you until you tell me frankly that you're bored."

The eager child quality he seldom saw was in her look and she was about to make some impulsive answer to his words, when there was the sound of a heavy step outside the door and they heard the next instant Perry's hilarious voice.

"Well, I'm jolly glad you kept him, Gerty, but, by Jove, I wonder how you hit it off. He's not your sort, you know."

The child quality vanished instantly from her face, and Adams watched the mocking insolence creep back upon her lips.

"On the other hand we're perfectly agreed," she said. "I don't confine my admiration to your type, you know."

"You don't, eh? Well, that's a good joke!" exclaimed Perry, with a break into his not unpleasant, though sensual laugh. As he stood, squaring his handsome chest, in the centre of the room, Adams felt that the mere animal splendour of the man had never been more impressive.

"I find to my great pleasure that Mrs. Bridewell and I are very good friends," remarked Adams, after a moment in which he had taken in Perry's full magnificence with his humorous short-sighted gaze, "and she has promised on the strength of it to extend to me the favour of her protection. No, I can't stay now," he added, in answer to Perry's protestations. "I'll see you again to-morrow—there's really not the faintest need to hurry."

And with a feeling that he was stifling in the over-heated flower-scented rooms, he went quickly from the house into the street.

There was no reason why the news of Laura should disquiet him—by no possible twist of his imagination could he bring the event of her marriage into any direct bearing on his own life, yet as he walked at his rapid, nervous pace toward his home in Thirty-fifth Street, he felt a burning sore like a great jagged wound in his breast. That merely human part of him, which was mixed so vitally into the intellectual fervour of his love, suffered from the loss almost as if it had been some fresh physical hurt. Was it possible that his avowal of renunciation had sought to keep back some particular treasure? some darling frailty? Or was his suffering at the moment but the first involuntary quiver of the nerves which would pass presently

leaving him at one with his fate again? "Was I content to give her up only so long as she belonged to no other man?" he asked. "Could I have relinquished her friendship so easily had I known that her love was not for me, but for Kemper?" Again the image of Kemper appeared to him, genial, impulsive, sensual—and he felt that if it had been another and a different man, he could have borne the loss of Laura with a finer courage.

Then the unworthiness of his mental attitude forced itself upon his reflections, and he realised that with his first return to his old state of selfish blindness, the illumination that had shone in his soul was gradually obscured. Could it happen to him that he should again lose the light? Again walk in darkness? His thoughts were no longer clear with that crystalline clearness of the day before, and it seemed to him suddenly that the key to all wisdom, which he had found so lately, had failed at the critical moment to unlock the fortified doors. That temporary and purely human reaction, which is the inevitable fleeting shadow cast on the mind by any spiritual irradiation, appeared in his present mood to contain within itself the ultimate abyss of failure. The single instant when he lost hold on God stretched itself into an eternity of nothingness through his soul.

He had walked rapidly and far, and looking up at his first almost automatic stop, he found that he had not only passed by his own house, but that he had come as far down as the corner of Twentieth Street and Broadway. The afternoon had waned before he knew it, and the streets were now filled

with people returning from their day's work in offices or in shops. On one side a newsboy was offering him the evening papers, and on the other a man had thrust a bunch of half-faded violets into his face.

As he stood now, hesitating for a moment beside the crossing, he became dimly aware that he had passed quickly from one state of consciousness into another, from the brief period of dream into the briefer transition which precedes the awakening—and that there was a distinct gap between his former and his present frame of mind. He *was* awakening—this he realised as he watched the crowd which surged rapidly by on either side—and there came to him almost with the conviction a vivid presentiment that the full return of his senses would bring at the same time a clearer and a deeper conception of life. His short unhappiness showed suddenly as a nightmare, and while he looked at the men and women among whom he stood, he felt that the egoism of his love for Laura had broadened into a generous stream of humanity which filled the world. The personal had passed suddenly into the universal; the spirit of desire had showed itself to be one with the spirit of pity; and the very agony of the rebellion through which he had come appeared as he looked back upon it to have enriched his consciousness of the tragedy in other lives. To live close to mankind, to make a little easier the old worn road, to stand shoulder to shoulder with the labourer at his toil, these were the impulses which sprang like a new growth from his past selfish longing. "Let me feel both the joy and the sorrow among which I move," was the prayer he now found strength to utter.

With renewed energy he turned to go onward, when, as he stepped upon the crossing by which he stood, he saw that a woman at his side was weeping softly, without noise, as she walked. Something of his old restraint, his old embarrassment, checked him for a moment; then he saw that she was poor and middle-aged and plainly clad, and he turned to speak to her, though still with a slight hesitation.

"I wish you would do me the kindness to tell me your trouble," he said.

She stopped short in her walk and looked up with a nervous squint of her eyes, while the undried tears were still visible on her large mottled cheeks. As she stood there, timid and silent, before him, he saw that the basket contained a squirming mass of gray fur, and stooping to look at it more attentively, he found that the fur belonged to a number of small animals, huddled asleep on the fragment of a red and white plaid shawl. He liked the woman's face and he liked, too, the little creatures in the basket; and more than this he felt the great need of helping as the one means to bridge the extreme spiritual isolation in which he stood. To give one's self! Was not this final surrender of the soul the beginning of all faith as of all love?

"I believe that you need help," he said, in the winning voice which had always had a strange power to open out the hearts of others, "and I know that I need to give it."

In the midst of the crude noises of the street, surrounded by the screaming newsboys and the clanging cars, he saw that she paused for an instant to cast a quick, frightened glance about her.

"If you'll believe what I say," she replied, in a voice which had gained the assurance of a heartfelt conviction, "I was just praying for help to come, but somehow it always seems to take one's breath clean away when there's an answer. I've been trying to sell some of the little creatures," she went on, "but they don't go well to-day and I guess Jim won't be able to hold out till I get the money for his funeral."

"And Jim is your husband?" he asked quietly.

"I married him more than thirty years ago," she answered, stooping to wipe her eyes with a hard rub on the sleeve of her jacket, "and he was always a good worker until this sickness came. I've never known him to miss a day's work so long as he had his health," she added proudly, "and that, too, when so many other husbands were soaking themselves in drink."

"And he's ill now?" asked Adams, as she paused.

"He's been dying steadily for a week, sir," she answered with the simple directness of the grief which takes account only of the concrete fact, "and I've been working day and night to make up his burial money by the time he needs it. If he'd only manage to last a day or two longer I might lay up enough to keep him out of the paupers' lot," she finished with a kind of awful cheerfulness.

It was this cheerfulness, he found, glimmering like some weird death-fire over the actual horror, which made his realisation of the tragedy the more poignant, and lent even a certain distinction to the poverty which she described. Here, indeed, was the supreme vulgarity of suffering—and before it his own personal afflictions appeared as unsubstantial as

shades. At least he had had the empty dignity of receiving his sorrow with a full sense of its importance, but with this woman the very presence of grief was crowded out by the brutal obligation to meet the material demands of death. Death, indeed, had become but an incident—a side issue of the event—and the funeral had usurped the place and the importance of a law of nature.

"Let me go home with you—I should like it," he said when they had started to walk on again; and then with an instinctive courtesy, he took the basket from her and slipped it over his own arm. A little later, when following her directions, they entered a surface car for the West Side, he placed the basket on his knees and sat looking down at the small gray kittens that awaking suddenly began to play beneath his eyes. The jostling crowd about him, the substantial panting figure of the woman beside him, and more than all the joyous animal movements of the kittens in his lap, seemed somehow to return to him that intimate relation to life which he had lost. He no longer felt the sensation of detachment, of insecurity in his surroundings; for his own individual existence had become in his eyes but a part of the enlarged universal existence of the race.

As the car stopped the woman motioned to him with an imperative gesture, and then as they reached the sidewalk, she pointed to a fruiterer's stand on the outside of a tenement near the corner.

"It is just above there—on the third floor," she said, threading her way with a large determined ease through the children playing upon the sidewalk.

When he mounted presently the dimly lighted

staircase inside, it seemed to Adams that the whole house, close, poorly-lighted, dust laden as it was, was filled to the echo with the ceaseless voices of children—laughing voices, crying voices, scolding voices, voices lifted as high in joy as in grief. So strong was his impression of the number of the little inmates that he was almost surprised when the woman pushed open a door on the third landing and led the way into a room which appeared deserted except for the occupant of the clean white bed by the window.

The whole place was scrupulously neat, he saw this at the first glance—saw the well swept floor, the orderly arrangement of the chairs, the spotless white cambric curtains parted above the window sill, on which a red geranium bore a single blossom out of season. Several large gray cats arose at the woman's entrance and came crying to the kittens in the basket; and she motioned to Adams to put the little creatures on the floor. Then going to the bed she stooped over the man who lay there—outstretched and perfectly motionless as if wrapped in a profound and quiet slumber. One iron-stained misshapened hand lay on the outside of the coverlet and as Adams looked at it, he saw in it a symbol of the whole tragedy upon which he gazed. The face of the sleeper was hidden from him, but so expressive was the distorted, toil-hardened hand, with the fingers fallen a little open as if in relief from a recently dropped tool, that the voice of the woman sounding in his ears merely put into words his own unspoken knowledge.

"Ah, he's gone," she said. "He promised me he'd

hold out if he could, but I guess he couldn't manage it."

Then standing there in the bare, cleanly swept room, bright with the voices of children which floated in from the staircase, Adams was conscious, with a consciousness more vital and penetrating than he had ever felt before, that the place, the universe and his own soul were filled to overflowing with the infinite presence of God.

CHAPTER XI

On the Wings of Life

It was on the morning after Gerty's conversation with Adams that Laura carried the news of her engagement to Uncle Percival.

"I've something really interesting for you this morning," she began, taking his withered little hand in hers as she sat down on the high footstool before his chair.

His wandering blue eyes fixed her for a moment, then, turning restlessly, travelled to his flute which lay silent on the table on his elbow.

"Ah, but I'm ahead of you for once," he remarked with his amiable toothless smile, "there's a new batch of rabbits in the yard and I've already seen 'em. Don't tell Rosa, my dear," he cautioned in a whisper, "or she'll be sure to drown 'em everyone."

Releasing his hand from her clasp, he reached for his flute, and, with a pathetic delight in the presence of his enforced listener, raised the mouth of the instrument to his lips. The tune he played was "The Last Rose of Summer," and Laura sat patiently at his side until the end. With the final note, even as he laid the flute lovingly across his knees, she saw that the music had strengthened and controlled his enfeebled mind.

"I want to tell you that I shall be married in the autumn, dear Uncle Percival," she said with a renewed effort to penetrate the senile abstraction in which he lived.

"Married!" repeated the old man, with an indignant surprise for which she was entirely unprepared. "Married! · Why, what on earth makes you do a ridiculous thing like that? It's out of the question," he continued with an angry vehemence, "it is utterly and absurdly out of the question."

For an instant it seemed to Laura that she had absolutely no response to offer.

"But almost everyone marries in the end, you know," she said at last.

"I have lived very comfortably to be eighty-five," retorted Uncle Percival, "and I never married."

"Oh, but you never fell in love," persisted Laura.

"In love? Tush!" protested the old man with scorn, "and why should you? I have never felt the need of it."

"Well, I don't think one can help it sometimes," remonstrated Laura, a little helplessly. "One doesn't always want it, but it comes anyway."

"Then if I didn't want it I wouldn't let it bother me," said Uncle Percival, adding immediately, "What does Rosa think of this state of things, I wonder—Rosa is a very sensible woman."

"Oh, she's heartily pleased—everybody is pleased but you."

Uncle Percival shook his head in stubborn disapproval. "People are always pleased at the mistakes of others," he observed, "it's human nature, I suppose, and they can't help it, but I tell you I've seen a great

deal too much of love all my life—and it's better left alone, it's better left alone."

Rising dejectedly, he wandered off to his rabbits, while Laura, as soon as the curtains at the door had fallen together again behind his shrunken little figure, forgot him with that complete forgetfulness of trivial details which is possible only to the mind that is in the possession of an absorbing emotion. All hesitation, all uncertainty, all disappointment, had been swept from her consciousness as if by a destroying and purifying flame; and for the past few weeks she had lived with that passionate swiftness of sensation which gives one an ecstatic sense of rushing, like a winged creature, through crawling time. Life, indeed, was winged for her at the moment; her soul flew; and she felt her happiness beating like a caged bird within her breast. The agony of the imprisoned creature was there also, for she loved blindly without understanding why she loved—and yet it was this hidden mystery of her passion, this divine miracle which attended its conception, that filled the world about her with the invisible, announcing hosts of angels. She could explain nothing—life, death, birth, the ordinary incidents of every day were but so many signs and portents of the unseen wonders; and every breath she drew seemed as great a miracle to her as the raising of Lazarus from the tomb.

Closing her eyes she thought of the afternoon before when she had gone out with her lover in his automobile. Life at the instant had condensed itself into a flash of experience, and his face as he looked at her had been clear and strong as the wind which rushed by them. "Faster! faster! let us go

faster!" she had begged, "let me live this one hour flying," and even with the words she had wondered if the same rapture would ever enter into her love again? Was it possible to touch the highest point of one's being twice in a single lifetime? Was it given to any human creature to repeat perfection? And he? Would he ever know it again? she questioned, with an uncertainty sharp as a sword that pierced her through. Would she ever find in his eyes a look that would be anything but a shadow of the look she had seen on the day before? Was happiness, after all, as fluid a quantity as the emotion which gave it birth?

Standing beside the table, she leaned her cheek for a moment upon the roses in the Venetian vase; and it seemed to her, as the petals brushed her face, that she felt again his eager kisses fall on her eyes and throat. The memory sent her blood beating to her pulses; and she saw his face in her thoughts as she had seen it on that afternoon, transfigured and intensified by the peculiar vividness of her perceptions.

"There has been nothing like this in my life before," he had said in a passion of sincerity, "there has been nothing in my life but you from the beginning." The irony was gone then from his voice; she had found no hint of even the satirical humour in his eyes; and as she remembered this now it seemed to her that she had there for the first time—for the one and only moment since she had known him—succeeded in holding by her touch that deeper chord of his nature for which she had always felt herself to be instinctively groping.

She was still brooding over the rapture of yesterday,

when the door opened quickly and Kemper came in with the eager haste in which he appeared to live every instant of his life. At the first glance she saw that the ardour of the last afternoon was still in his eyes, and the next moment she found herself yielding to his impatient kisses.

"I was trying to decide whether I love you more when you are with me or when you are away," she said with a joyful laugh.

"Well, as for me, I love you exactly a hundred times more when I see you," he retorted gayly.

His words seemed, as she repeated them, an affront to her insatiable desire for the perfection of love.

"Then if you never saw me again you would be able to forget me?" she asked a little wounded.

He laughed easily with a quick return to his pleasant banter, "I hope so. What's the use of loving when nothing comes of it?"

When nothing comes of it! A cloud dimmed the radiant clearness of her morning; then she met the strong tenderness in his eyes, and with an effort, she thrust her disappointment aside, as she had thrust it aside at every meeting since the beginning of her love.

"I have always wondered if happiness were as happy as people thought," she said gravely, "and now I know, I know."

"And is it really?" he asked, with the confident smile which piqued her even while it fascinated.

For answer she lifted to him "the seraphic look" which he had never seen in any face but hers; and as he met her eyes it appeared to him that all other women whom he had loved were but tinted shadows—

that they were one and all utterly devoid of the mystery by which passion lives. Here in her face he saw at last the charm and the wonder of sex made luminous; and while he watched her emotion quiver on her lips, he began to ask himself if this were not the assurance in his own heart of a feeling that might endure for life? Would this, too, change and perish as his impulses had changed and perished until to-day?

"Shall I tell you what I have been thinking since last night?" she questioned in a voice that was like a song to his ears, "it is that I have been all my life a plant in a dark cellar, groping toward the light and never finding it—always groping, groping."

She leaned toward him, placing her hands, the lovely, delicate hands he loved, upon his shoulders, "I've grown to the light! I've grown to the light!" she whispered joyously.

He raised her hand to his lips, and his teeth closed softly over each slender finger one by one.

"So I am the light?" he enquired with tender humour.

She shook her head. "Not you, but love."

A short laugh broke from him. "But where, my dear sweetheart," he retorted, "would love be without me?"

"I don't dare to think," she was too earnest to take his jest with lightness, "it is strange, isn't it?—that but for you I should never have known—this."

"Who can tell? There might have come along another fellow and you'd probably have made love quite as prettily to a substitute."

"Never!" she shook her head with an indignant

protest, "and you?" she added softly after a moment.

"And I? What?"

"Without me could you have felt it quite like this?"

She waited breathlessly, but the ironic spirit had got the better of his tenderness.

"My dear girl," he rejoined, "what a question?"

"But could you?—tell me," she implored in sudden passion.

"Well, I devoutly hope so," he answered lightly, "it's a thing I should'nt like to have missed, you know."

He leaned back closing his eyes; and immediately, without warning and against his will, there rose before him the seductive face of Madame Alta, and he recalled her exquisite voice, with its peculiar high note of piercing sweetness. Then he remembered his wife, and, one by one, the other women whom he had loved and forgotten or merely forgotten without loving. They meant so little in his existence now, and yet once, each in her own bad time had engrossed utterly his senses. In what rare quality of sentiment could this love differ from those lesser loves that had gone before?

But he was not given to introspection, and so the disturbing question left him almost as readily as it had come. When one attempted to think things out, there was no hope of escaping the endless circle with a clear head. No, he wasn't analytical, thank Heaven!

While he was still rejoicing in what he called his "practical turn of mind," he remembered suddenly an appointment at his club which he had made a week

ago and then overlooked in the absorbing interest of his engagement.

"By Jove, you'll get me into an awful scrape some day," he remarked cheerfully as he hurried into his overcoat. "I might have lost fifty thousand dollars by letting this thing slip."

His manner had changed completely with the awakened recollection; and finance in all its forms—the look of figures, the clink of coin—had assumed instantly the position of romance in his thoughts. For the moment Laura was crowded from his mind, and she recognised this with a pang sharp and cold as the thrust of a dagger.

"If you only knew how much you'd nearly cost me," were his last words as he ran down the steps.

At the corner he met Gerty's carriage and in response to her inviting gesture, he gave an order to the coachman as he sprang inside.

"Well, this is a godsend," he observed with a grateful sigh while he wrapped the fur rug carelessly about him. "A drive with a pretty woman leaves a surface car a good many miles behind. And you are unusually pretty this morning," he commented with a touch of daring gallantry.

"I ought to be," returned Gerty defiantly, "for heaven knows I take trouble enough about it. Oh, I *am* glad to see you!" she finished gayly, "how is Laura?"

He met her question with his genial smile. "She makes a pretty good pretence at happiness," he answered.

"And so she's really over head and ears in love?"

"Does it surprise you that she should find me charming?" he asked, laughing.

She nodded with unshaken candour.

"I was never so much surprised in all my life."

If his smile was ready it did not fail to betray a touch of vanity that was almost childlike.

"And yet there was a time when you yourself rather liked me," he retorted with his intimate and penetrating glance.

"Was there?" She avoided his look though her tone was almost insolent, "my dear fellow, I never in my life liked you better than I like you at this minute—but we are speaking now of Laura's liking not of mine. Oh, Arnold, Arnold, I am in a quake of fear."

"About Laura? Then get over it and don't be silly."

"And you are honestly and truly and terribly in earnest?"

"My dear girl, I'm going to marry her—isn't that enough? Does a man commit suicide except when he's sincere?"

Her shallow cynicism had dropped from her now, and she turned toward him with an unaffected anxiety in her face.

"Then it will last—it must."

"Last!" An expression of irritation showed in his eyes, and he shrugged his shoulders with an impatient movement. "Of course it won't last—nothing does. If you want the eternal you must seek it in eternity."

"So in the end it will be like—all the others?"

Because the question annoyed him he responded

to it with a frankness that was almost brutal. "Everything is like everything else," he returned, "there's nothing new, least of all in the emotions."

For a minute she looked at him in silence while the steady green flame appeared to him to grow brighter in her eyes. Was it contempt or curiosity that he saw in her face?

"Poor Laura!" she said at last very softly. "Poor happy Laura!"

At her words his dissenting laugh broke out, but he showed by his animated glance a moment later that it was of herself rather than of Laura that he was thinking.

"Is it such a terrible fate, after all, to become my wife?" he enquired.

His look challenged hers, and lifting her insolent bright eyes, she returned steadily the smiling gaze he bent upon her.

"Oh, dear me, yes," she answered merrily, "it is almost if not quite as bad as being Perry's."

The carriage had stopped at the door of his club, and his mind was already at work over the approaching interview.

"Well, you escaped the lesser for the greater ill," he responded pleasantly, as he gave her hand a careless parting pressure.

Part III

DISENCHANTMENT

CHAPTER I

A Disconsolate Lover and a Pair of Blue Eyes

With that strange hunger of youth for the agony of experience, Trent allowed the news of Laura's engagement to plunge him into an imaginary despondency which was quite as vivid as any reality of suffering. For a week he persistently refused his meals, and he was even seized with a kind of moral indignation when his perfectly healthy appetite asserted itself at irregular hours. To eat with a broken heart appeared to him an act of positive brutality; and yet he was aware that, in spite of the sting of his wounded pride, the tragic ending of his first romance produced not the slightest effect upon his physical enjoyment. It was an instance where a purely ideal sentiment struggled against a perfectly normal constitution.

"You could never have cared for me, of course I always knew that," he remarked one day to Laura, "but I can't help wishing that you hadn't fallen in love with anybody else."

From the bright remoteness of her happiness she smiled down upon him. "But doesn't such a wish as that strike you as rather selfish?"

"I don't care—I want you back again just as you used to be—and now," he added bitterly, "you've even given up your writing."

"I shall never write again," she answered, quietly, without regret. It was a truth which she felt only intuitively at the time, for her reason as yet had hardly taken account of a fact that was perfectly evident to the subtler perceptions of her feeling. She would never write again—her art had been only the exotic flowering of a luxuriant imagination and she had lost value as a creative energy while she had gained in experience as a human soul.

"I was too young, that was the trouble," pursued Trent, "there were five years between us."

"My dear boy," she laughed merrily, "there was all eternity."

His bitterness, he felt, grew heavily upon him while he watched her. A new beauty had passed into her face; the mystery of a thousand lives was in her look, in her gestures, in her voice; and she appeared to him not as herself alone, but as the embodied essence of all former loves of which he had dreamed—of all the enchanting dead women of whom the poets wrote. Then he thought of Arnold Kemper, with his exhausted emotions, his superficial cleverness, his engrossing middle-age, and especially of his approaching baldness. Was love, after all, he questioned, only a re-quickened memory in particular brain cells as modern scientists believed? Was physical heredity, in truth, the fulfilling of the law of life? and was the soul merely a series of vibrations by which matter lived and moved?

All the way home his angry scepticism boiled over in his thoughts, and at the luncheon table, a little later, he met his mother's placid enquiries with an explosion of boyish despair.

"There's no use trying to persuade me—I can't eat," he said.

"But, my dear son, I fear you'll work yourself into an illness," returned Mrs. Trent, with her unshaken calm.

"I don't care," replied the young man desperately, "whether I die now or later, it is all the same."

"I suppose really it is," admitted his mother; but she added after a pause in which she had dipped mildly into a philosophic curiosity, "The way being in love effects one has always seemed to me the very strangest thing in life. I remember your uncle Channing lived exclusively on onions for a whole month after Mattie Godwin refused his offer. Why he selected onions I could never explain," she concluded, "unless it was that he had never been able to endure the taste of them, and he seemed bent upon making himself as miserable as it was possible to be."

While she went on placidly eating her hashed chicken, Trent tossed off a glass or two of claret, which he was perfectly aware, taken on his empty stomach, would immediately produce a racking headache. Since his passion was not sincere, it occurred to him that it might at least become dramatic; but he saw presently, with aggrieved surprise, that the impression made upon his mother by his violent behavior was far slighter than he had brought himself to expect. When next she spoke her thoughts appeared to have strayed utterly from the subject of his appetite.

"I couldn't sleep last night for thinking of that poor Christina Coles," she said, "the char-woman told me yesterday that the child had been obliged to go out

and pawn some of her things in order to get the money to pay her room rent."

With a start his mind swung back from the dream life to the actual. He had not seen Christina for more than a week, and the thought of her pierced his heart with a keen reproach.

"Good God, has it come to that?" he exclaimed.

"What hurts me most is not being able to do anything to help her," resumed Mrs. Trent, "she's so proud that I don't dare even ask her to a meal for fear she'll take offence."

"But if it's so bad as that why doesn't she go home —she must have a home."

"Oh, she has—but to go back, she feels, would mean that she's given up, and the char-woman declares that she'll never give up so long as she's alive."

"Well, she's a precious little fool," observed Trent, as he drank an extra glass of claret.

But the thought of Christina was not to be so lightly put from him, and before the afternoon was over he went up to the eighth landing and knocked in vain at her door. She was still out, as the little pile of rejected manuscript lying on her threshold bore witness; and he turned away and came down again with a disappointment of which he felt himself to be half ashamed. An hour later he ran against her when he was going out into the street, and as she turned with her constrained little bow and looked at him for an instant with her sincere blue eyes, he was almost overcome by the rush of pity which the sight of her evoked. How pale and thin she had grown! how shabby her little tan coat looked in the daylight;

and yet what a charming curve there was to her brown head! He realised then for the first time that brown—warm, living brown with glints of amber—was the one colour for a woman's hair.

The next morning he rushed off indignantly to upbraid Adams.

"The girl's starving, I tell you—we can't let her starve," he exclaimed in an agony of remorse.

"Oh, yes we can," returned Adams with a cheerful brutality which enraged the younger man. "Starving isn't half so bad as writing trash. But you needn't look at me like that," he added, "she doesn't come here any longer now. She told me fiction was the field she meant to dig in."

"Well, you'll kill her among you," was Trent's threatening rejoinder; and filled with a righteous fury against literature he went back again to knock at the door of Christina's empty room. Once his mother came up also, but the girl, it appeared, was always out now, while the rejected manuscript thickened each morning upon the threshold. Several times Mrs. Trent arranged a little tray of luncheon and sent it up stairs by the old negro servant, but the message brought back was always that Christina was not at home. And then gradually, as the weeks went by, the dignity and the pathos of her struggle were surrounded in Trent's mind by a romantic halo. Her beauty borrowed from his poetic fancy the peculiar touch of atmosphere it lacked, and his thoughts dwelt more and more upon her slender, girlish figure, her smooth brown hair, and the flower-like sweetness of her face.

Then just as he had grown almost hopeless of ever

seeing her again, he found her one evening in the elevator as he went up to his mother's rooms. The touch of her cold little hand on his sent a sudden shock to his heart, and while he looked anxiously into her face, he saw her go deadly pale and bite her lip sharply as if to bring back her consciousness by the sting of pain.

"You are ill," he said eagerly; "don't deny it, for haven't I eyes? Yes, you must, you shall come with me in to mother."

Even then she would have turned proudly away, but with his impulsive, lover's sympathy he led her from the elevator upon the landing on which he lived. "She is waiting for you—she wants you," he urged with passion; "and can't you see—oh, Christina, I want you, too!"

But his fervour only left her the more cold and shrinking, and she shook her head with a refusal that was almost angry.

"How dare you? Why did you make me come out?" she asked. "I must go back—I am not well—oh, I must go back!"

Over the angry tones of her voice he saw her entreating eyes shining like wet flowers, and as he looked into them it came to him in a revelation of knowledge that the meaning of everything that had been was made clear at last. He knew now why he had succeeded where Christina had failed—he knew why Laura had refused his love, and why, even in his misery, her refusal had left his heart untouched. And beyond all these things, he realised that now his boyhood was over and that from the experience of this one moment he had become a man.

CHAPTER II

The Deification of Clay

Not until a month after the announcement of Laura's engagement did she come face to face for the first time with the ugly skeleton which lies hidden beneath the most beautiful of dreams. The spring had passed in a troubled rapture; and it was on one of the bright, warm days in early June that she found awaiting her on the hall table when she came in from her walk a letter addressed in a strange handwriting and bearing a strange foreign postmark. Beside this was a note from Kemper explaining a broken engagement of the day before; and she read first her lover's letter, which ended, as every letter of his had ended since the beginning of their love, "Yours with my whole heart and soul, Arnold."

With an emotion which repetition could never deaden, she stooped to kiss the last sentence he had written, before she turned carelessly to take up the strange foreign envelope, which she had thrown, with her veil and gloves, on the chair at her side. For a moment she pondered indifferently the address; then, almost as she broke the seal, the first words she read were those which lay hidden away in the love letter within her hand, "Yours with my whole heart and soul, Arnold."

In her first shock, even while the blow still blinded

her eyes, she turned to seek wildly for some possible solution; and it was then that she discovered that the letter, in Kemper's handwriting, was addressed evidently to some other woman, since it bore the date of a day in June just three years before she had first met him. Three years ago he had declared himself to belong, heart and soul, to this other woman; and to-day, with no remembrance in his mind, it seemed, of that former passion, he could repeat quite as ardently the old threadbare avowal. How many times, she asked herself, had he used that characteristic ending to his love letters?—and the thing appeared to her suddenly to be the veriest travesty of the perfect self-surrender of love.

She was a woman capable of keen retrospective jealousy, and as she sat there, beaten down from her winged ecstasy by the blow that had struck at her from the silence, she told herself passionately that her life was wrecked utterly and her brief happiness at an end. Then, with that relentless power of intellect, from which her emotions were never entirely separated, she began deliberately to disentangle the true facts from the temporary impulses of her jealous anger.

"I am wounded and yet why am I wounded and by what right?" she demanded, with a pathetic groping after the self-condemnation which would acquit her lover, "he has lived his life, I know—I have always known it—and his letter has only brought forcibly before me a fact which I have accepted though I have not faced it." And it occurred to her, with the bitter sweetness of a consoling lie, that he could not have been false to her three years ago, since he was not then even aware of her existence. To

dwell on this thought was like yielding to the power of an insidious drug, and yet she found herself forcing it almost deliriously against her saner judgment. "How could he wrong me so long as I was a stranger to him?" she repeated over and over. "On the day that he first loved me, his old life, with its sins and its selfish pleasures, was blotted out." But her conscience, even while she reasoned, told her that love could possess no power like this—that the man who loved her to-day, was the inevitable result of the man who had loved other women yesterday, and that there was as little permanence in the prompting of mere impulse as there was stability in change itself. So the voice within her spoke through the intolerable clearness of her intellect; and in her frantic desire to drown the thing it uttered, she repeated again and again the empty words which her heart prompted. Yet she knew even though she urged the falsehood upon her thoughts, that it was less her argument that pleaded for Kemper than the memory of a look in his face at animated instants, which rose now before her and appealed disturbingly to her emotions.

Three ways of conduct were open to her, she saw plainly enough. Wisdom suggested that she should not only put the letter aside, but that she should banish the recollection of its existence from her life. But, while she admitted that this would be the most courageous treatment of the situation, she recognised perfectly that to act upon such a decision was utterly beyond her strength. Though she were to destroy the object, was the memory of it not seared indelibly into her brain? and would not this memory return to embitter long afterward her

happiest moments? "When he kisses me I shall remember that he has kissed other women and I feel that I shall grow to hate him if he should ever write to me again in those lying words." But she knew intuitively that he would use the same ending in his next letter, and that she would still be powerless to hate him, if only because of his disturbing look, which came back to her whenever she attempted to judge him harshly. "I might really hate him so long as he was absent from me, and yet if he came again and looked at me in that way for a single instant, I know that, in spite of my resolution, I would throw myself into his arms." And she felt that she despised herself for a bondage against which she struggled as hopelessly as a bird caught in a fowler's net.

Of the two ways which remained to her, she chose, in the end, the course which appeared to her to be the least ungenerous. She would not read the letter—the opening and the closing sentences she had seen by accident—for, when all was said, it had not been written for her eyes; and it struck her, as she brooded over it, that there would be positive disloyalty in thus stealing in upon the secrets of Kemper's past. No, she would place it in his hands, she determined finally, still unread; and in so doing she would not only defeat the purpose of the sender, but would prove to him as well as to herself that her faith in him was as unalterable as her love. After all to trust was easier than to distrust, for the brief agony of her indecision had brought to her the knowledge that the way of suspicion is the way of death.

And so when he came a little later she gave the

letter, at which she had not again looked, into his hands. "Here is something that reached me only this morning," she said. "It is not worth thinking of, and I have read only the first and the last sentence."

At her words he unfolded the paper, throwing a mere casual glance, as he did so, upon the thin foreign envelope, which appeared to convey to him no hint of its significant contents.

Then, after a hurried skimming of the first page, he turned back again and carefully studied the address in a mystification which was pierced presently by a flash of light.

"By Jove, so she's heard it!" he exclaimed; and the instant afterward he added in a kind of grudging admiration, "Well, she's a devil!"

The incident appeared suddenly to engross him in a manner that Laura had not expected, and he stooped to examine the postmark with an attention which gave her, while she watched him, a queer sense of being left out quite in the cold.

"But why, in thunder, should she care?" he demanded.

"She?" there was no trouble in her voice, only an indifferent question.

"Oh, it's Jennie Alta, of course—she's perfectly capable of such a thing." Then, reaching out, he drew Laura into his arms with a confidence which had the air, she thought, of taking the situation almost too entirely for granted—of accepting too readily her attitude as well as his possession of her. "My darling girl, what a regular brick you are!" he said.

Though she realised, as he spoke, that this was the reward of her silence and her struggle, she told herself, in the next breath that, in some way, it was all inadequate. She had expected more than a phrase, and the very fact that the note of earnestness was absent from his voice but made her desire the sound of it the more passionately. Again she felt the baffled sensation which came to her in moments of their closest intimacy. Had his soul, in truth, eluded her for the last time? And was there in the profoundest emotion always a distance which it was forever impossible to bridge? Yet the uncertainty, the very lack of a fuller understanding only added fervour to the passion that burned in her heart.

"It's all over now, so we may as well warm ourselves by the failure of her deviltry," he observed presently, as he flung the crumpled paper into the fire. "I'm downright sorry she'll never know how little harm she's done."

"It might, I suppose, have been worse," suggested Laura.

"Well, I suppose so—and you mean me to believe that you didn't even read it?" he enquired with tender gayety.

She gave him her eyes frankly as an answer to his appeal for faith. "Why should I? I love you," she replied.

For an instant—a single sufficing instant—he met her look with an earnestness that was equal to her own. The man in him, she almost cried out in her exultation, was touched at last.

"May God grant that your confidence will never fail me," he rejoined a little sadly.

"When that comes it will be time to die," was her answer.

Taking her hand in his he held it in a close pressure for several minutes. Then the earnestness she had arrested fled from her touch, and when he spoke again she could not tell whether his words were uttered sincerely or simply as the outcome of his sarcastic humour.

"If you were a flesh-and-blood woman instead of an eccentric sprite," he remarked, "I suppose you'd want me to make a clean breast of the whole affair, but I can't because, to tell the truth, I've forgotten everything about it."

"Then you didn't honestly love her, so it doesn't matter."

"Love her! Pshaw!" Though he laughed out the words there was an angry flush in his face. "Do you think I'm the kind of man to love a mere singing animal? And besides," he concluded with a brutal cynicism which repelled her sharply, "I'm of an economical turn, you know, and the love of such women comes too high. I've seen them eat up a fellow's income as if it were a box of Huyler's." The words were no sooner uttered than his mood changed quickly and he was on his feet. "But I didn't mean to give you the whole morning, sweetheart, I merely looked in to say that I wanted you to come out with me in the car this afternoon. There's a fine breeze blowing."

For a thoughtful moment she hesitated before she answered. "I told Roger Adams that I should be at home," she returned, "but I dare say he won't mind not seeing me."

"Oh, I dare say," he retorted gayly. "Well, I'll pick you up, then, on the stroke of five."

As he left the room she went over to the window, and when he came out a little later, he turned upon the sidewalk to glance up at her and wave his hand. She was happy, perfectly happy, she told herself, as she looked eagerly after the last glimpse of his figure; but even while she framed the thought into words, she was conscious that her heart throbbed high in disappointment and that her eyes were already blind with tears.

When Adams sent up his card, at twenty minutes before five o'clock, she lingered a few moments before going downstairs in her motoring coat and veil. In response to her embarrassed excuses, he made only a casual expression of regret for the visit he had missed.

"It's a fine afternoon—just right for a run," he remarked, adding after a brief hesitation. "It's the proper thing, I suppose, to offer you congratulations, but I'm a poor hand, as you know, at making pretty speeches. I wish you happiness with all my heart—that's about all there is to say—isn't it?"

"That's about all," she echoed, "and at least if I'm not happy I shall have only myself to blame."

The silence that followed seemed to them both unnatural and constrained; and he broke it at last with a remark which sounded to him, while he uttered it, almost irrelevant.

"I've never seen much of Kemper, but I always liked him."

"I know," she nodded, "you were chums at college."

"Oh, hardly that, but we knew each other pretty well. He's a lucky chap and I hope he has the sense to see it."

"There's no doubt whatever of his sense!" she laughed. Then, growing suddenly serious, she leaned toward him with her old earnest look. "No one has ever known him, I think, just as I do," she went on, "because no one understands how wonderfully good he really is. He's so good," she finished almost triumphantly, as if she had overcome by her assertion a point which he disputed, "that there are times when he makes me feel positively wicked."

Having no answer ready but a smile, he gave her this pleasantly enough, so that she might take it, if she chose, for a complete agreement. Though his heart was filled with repressed tenderness, there was nothing further now that he could say to her, for he realised as he looked into her face, that there was little room in her happiness either for his tenderness or for himself. An aversion, too, to meeting Kemper awoke in him, and so, after a few minutes of trivial conversation, he rose and held out his hand.

"I'm very busy just now, so I may not see you again for quite awhile," he said at parting, "but remember if ever you should want me that I am always waiting."

A little later, as he walked up the street in the June sunshine, he saw Kemper's new automobile spinning rapidly from the direction of Fifth Avenue.

CHAPTER III

The Greatest of These

For a minute after Kemper had passed in his car, Adams turned back and stood looking down the long street filled with pleasant June sunshine. In the distance a hand-organ was grinding out a jerky sentimental air, and beside him, at the corner by which he stood, a crippled vender of fruit had halted his little cart of oranges and apples.

A year ago Adams might have told himself, in the despair of ignorance, that since Laura had given her love to Kemper she was lost to him forever. But he had learned now that this could not be true—that she was too closely knit into his destiny to separate herself entirely from it; and there came to him, while he stood there, a strange mystic assurance that she would some day feel that she had need of him again. His love had passed triumphantly through its first earthly stages, and in the large impassioned yearning with which he thought of her there was, so far as he himself was conscious, but little left of a sharper personal desire. All desire, indeed, which has its root in the physical craving for possession seemed to have gone out of him in the last few months; and since the earliest dawn of that deeper consciousness within his soul, he had almost ceased to think of himself as an isolated individual life.

To let go the personal was to fall back again on the Eternal; between the soul and God, he had learned in his deepest agony, there is room for nothing more impregnable than the illusion of self. As Roger Adams—as a mere separate existence, he was a failure. The things which he had desired in life he had not possessed; the things which he had possessed he had ceased very soon, in any vital sense, to desire. Of his life's work, so big at the beginning, he saw now that he had made but a small achievement—a volume of essays on the writings of other men and a few years editing of a magazine which had absorbed his strength without yielding him the smallest return of fame. On every side, from all avenues of hope or of mere impulse, there had crowded upon him, he admitted smiling, but disappointment and disillusion. He had played for happiness as every man plays for it from the cradle, he had staked his throw as boldly, he had made his resolves as desperately, as any of his fellows, and yet at the end of his forty years he had not a single object to put forward as his reward. Nothing remained to him! As the world counts success he could show only failure.

But the larger vision was still before him, and he knew that all these thoughts were the cheapest falsehood. In spite of appearances, in spite of the outward emptiness of his existence, he had not failed; and in the hour that he had put life aside he had for the first time in his whole experience begun really to live. In surrendering his own small individual being he knew that he had entered into the possession of a being immeasurably larger than his own.

He looked at the fruit vender smiling, and the

man's answering smile came to him like the clasp of fellowship. "Did he, too, understand?" was Adams' unspoken question, "had he, also, found the key that unlocked his prison?" and there flowed into his heart something of the rapture with which Laura had cried: "I've grown to the light!" In each exclamation there was ecstasy, but in hers it was the short, troubled ecstasy of the senses, which hears its doom even in the hour of its own fulfilment; while from his finer joy there shone forth that radiant energy, in which is both warmth and light, both rest and action, which illumines not only the soul within, but transfigures and refines the mere dull ordinary facts of life.

As he stood there the car passed him again, and Laura and Kemper both turned, smiling, to look back at him. When Laura's long white veil was lost, with a last flutter, in the sunshine, he nodded to the fruit vender, and crossing to Broadway started in the direction of his home.

He had asked Trent to dine with him—the boy looked fagged he thought, and it might do him good to talk freely about his play. Then he recalled several letters that he had put aside for the sake of seeing Laura; and retracing his steps, he went back to his office and sat down before his desk. It surprised him sometimes to find how little irksome such uninteresting details had become.

They talked late over their cigars and coffee, and when at last Trent rose, with a laughing reminder of his mother, and went out into the hall to put on his overcoat, Adams passed by him, after a final handshake, and entered his darkened study at the end

of the hall. He heard the door close quickly as Trent left the house, and his mind was still full of the boy's dramatic ambitions, as he paused beside his desk and bent down to raise the wick of the green lamp. He had fallen into the habit of sitting up rather late now, and there was a paper on his blotting-pad which he was preparing for the coming issue of his magazine. After glancing hastily over, he found that the last few sentences were rearranging themselves in his thoughts, and he had set himself patiently to the redraughting of the paragraph, when a slight sound at the door caused him to look up suddenly with the suspended blue pencil still in his hand. It was too late for the maids, he knew—they had already gone to bed before Trent left—and he knew also that the person who entered at this hour must have opened the outer door by means of a latch-key. The soft, slow movement outside sent a nervous shiver through him; he was aware the next instant that he gripped the pencil more closely in his hand; and then, rising to his feet with a breathless impulse to be face to face at once with the inevitable moment, he made a single step forward, while he watched the knob turn, the door open slowly, and Connie cross the threshold and pause confusedly as if blinded by the lamplight.

The pencil dropped from his hand; he heard it fall with a thud upon the carpet; and then he heard nothing else except the beating of his own arteries in his ears. Time seemed to stop suddenly and then to whirl madly forward while he stood rooted to his square of carpet, with his useless hands hanging helplessly at his sides. It was the supreme instant of his life that was before him, and yet he was as

powerless to meet it as the infant in the womb to avert the hour of its birth. Dumb and petrified by very force of the will within him, he waited immovable on the spot of carpet, while his eyes saw only the visible wreck of the woman who stood upon his threshold. His dreams of her had been visions of horror, but the most pitiable of them had fallen far short of the reality as he saw it now. From her streaked blonde hair, already powdered with gray, to her exhausted bedraggled feet, which seemed hardly to support her trembling body, she stood there, terrible and full of anguish, like the most tragic ghost of his imaginary horrors. Face to face with each other they were held speechless by the knowledge that there was no word by which the past might be justified or the future made any easier for them to meet; and as in all great instants of life the thing that was said between them was uttered at last in an unbroken silence.

Then as they stood there a slight sound changed the atmosphere of the room. The shade of the lamp, which Adams had raised too high, cracked with a sharp noise and fell to the floor in broken pieces; and at the shock Connie gave a hysterical shriek and lifted to Adams the frightened glance of her ignorant blue eyes.

"I—I had nowhere to go and I am very tired," she said, in her old tone of childish irritation, "I don't think I was ever so tired in my life before."

Her voice snapped the icy constraint which held him and he knew now that he was ready to face the hour on its own terms. His will was as the strength of the strong, and he felt standing there, that he would ask

no quarter of his fate. Let it be what it would, he knew that it was powerless to close on him again the door of his prison.

"Then you did right to come back, Connie," he said quietly, "you did right to come back."

His words rang out almost exultantly, but the moment afterward he was terrified by their immediate effect—for Connie—throwing herself forward upon the floor, burst wildly into one of her old spells of weeping, calling upon God, upon himself, and upon the man whom she had loved and hated. The frenzied beating of her small, helpless hands, the streaming of her tears, the quiver of her wrecked, emaciated body, the convulsed agony that looked at him from her face—these things made their appeal to that compassion by which he lived, and he found that the way which he had thought difficult had become to him as familiar as the breath he drew.

"It is all over now—there is nothing but quiet here," he said.

She lay still instantly at his words, her face half hidden in the cushions of the sofa; and turning from her he went into the dining-room and brought back a glass of wine and some bread and milk. As he fed her, she opened her lips with a little humble, tired movement which was utterly unlike the Connie whom he remembered. Was it possible that in her degradation she had learned the first rare grace of spirit which is meekness?

"Take it all, every drop," he said once, when she would have pushed the spoon away; and turning obediently, she swallowed the last drops of milk.

"It is very good," she murmured as he rose to put

down the emptied bowl. The words brought a quick moisture of recollection to his eyes, and he found himself asking if the time had come at last when Connie could find pleasure in the taste of bread and milk?

After this she lay motionless on the floor until he carried her upstairs and placed her upon the bed as he had done so often on her past reckless nights. But there was no remembrance in his mind now of that former service; and as he turned on the electric light and drew the blankets over her shivering body, he was hardly surprised even by the readiness with which events, left perfectly alone, had managed to adjust themselves. Why he had acted as he had done, he could not have told; had he stopped to think of it he would probably have said that he had seen no other way. Connie as his wife, as the mother even of his dead child, had come to mean nothing to him any more; but Connie as something far deeper than this—as the object of inexhaustible compassion, as the tragedy of mortal failure—possessed now a significance which no human relation could cover by a name. Beyond the abandoned wife, he could see —not less clearly than on that night when he had waited in the snow outside the opera house—the small terrified soul caught in a web of circumstance from which there was no escape.

Standing at daybreak in the centre of his study floor, he remembered the last humble look with which she had closed her eyes; and he saw in it a gratitude that was like the first faint dawning of the daybreak. For the first time in his life he had watched in Connie's eyes the struggle for consciousness which was as the

struggle of an animal in whom a soul had come painfully to birth; and the memory of it sent a strange, an almost divine happiness to his heart. Was it possible that the will of God had moved here while he slept? Was it possible, he asked himself in an ecstasy of wonder, that in spite of all sin, all failure, all degradation, all despair, he had really won Connie's soul?

CHAPTER IV

Adams Watches in the Night and Sees the Dawn

For a week after her home-coming Connie lay ill and almost unconscious in her chamber. Since her first wild outburst on the night of her return she had allowed no hint of remorse or gratitude to break through the obstinate silence upon her lips; and the impression she gave Adams, on his occasional visits to her room, was of a soul and body too exhausted for even the slightest emotional activity. She had made of her life what her desire prompted; and she seemed to suggest now, lying there wrecked and silent, that the end of all self-gratification is in utter weariness of spirit.

Then gradually, as the long June days went by, life appeared feebly to renew itself and move within her. At first it was only a look, raised to Adams, when he bent over her, with something of the pathetic, expectant wonder of a sick child; then a helpless expressive gesture, and at last he found in her eye a clearer and fuller recognition of her surroundings and of himself. The gratitude he had seen on that terrible night surprised him again one day as he spoke to her; and after this he began to watch for its reappearance with an eagerness which he himself found it difficult to understand. Of all virtues gratitude was most

lacking in the woman who had been his wife; and this slow, silent growth of it, showed to him as no less a miracle than the coming of the spring or the resurrection of the dead earth beneath the rain. There were moments even, when he felt that he must move softly, lest he disturb the working of those spiritual forces which make for righteousness by strange and wonderful ways. Strange and wonderful, indeed, he had found, beyond all miracles were the means by which the soul might be brought back to the knowledge of its immortal destiny. Was it not under the eyes of a harlot that he, himself, had seen the mystery which is God's goodness? and so might he not find that Connie had learned, in the depths of her self-abasement, that the light which surrounds the pleasures of the senses is full of enchantment only for the distant, deluded vision?

But there were other hours when he asked himself if he were strong enough for the thing which he had before him—strong enough, not for the swift, exalted moment of the sacrifice, but for the daily fret and torment of a perfectly unpoetic self-denial. Would the light go out again and the exaltation fail him before many days? Then he remembered the pathos of her struggling smile, the timid groping of her hands, the deprecating gratitude he found in her look; and it seemed to him when all other resources were exhausted—when his energy, his duty, his religion flagged—that his compassion would still remain in his heart to render possible all that was impossible to his will alone. Compassion! this, he came to find in the end, was the true and the necessary key to any serious understanding of life.

He was still putting these questions to himself, when, coming in one afternoon from his office, he found Connie, wearing a loose fitting wrapper of some pale coloured muslin, awaiting him in an easy chair beside her window. It was the first time that she had left her bed; and when he offered a few cheerful congratulations upon her recovered strength, she looked up at him with a face which still showed signs of the hideous ravages of the last few months. In her hollowed cheeks, in her quivering unsteady lips, and in the dull grayness of her hair, from which the golden dye had faded, he could find now no faint traces of that delicate beauty he had loved. At less than thirty years she looked the embodiment of uncontrolled and reckless middle-age.

"It isn't that I'm really better—not really," she said, in answer to his look almost more than to his words, "but the doctor told me that I must get up and dress to-day. He wants me to go to the hospital this afternoon."

Her voice was so composed—so unlike the usual nervous quiver of her speech—that at first he could only repeat her words in the vague blankness of his surprise.

"To the hospital? Then you are ill?"

"I asked him not to tell you," she replied, with a tremor of the lips which had almost the effect of a smile, "he didn't understand—he couldn't, so I wanted you to hear it first from me. I'll never be any better—I'll never get really well again—without such an operation—and he thinks, he says, that it must be at once—without delay."

As she spoke she stretched out her hand for a

glass of water that stood at her side, and in the movement her wedding ring slipped from her thin finger and rolled to a little distance upon the floor. Picking it up he handed it back to her, but she placed it indifferently upon the table. Her attitude, with its dull quiet of sensation, impressed him at the instant almost more than the greater importance of what she told him. Was it this acceptance of the thing, he wondered, which appeared to rob it of all terror in her mind? and was the dumb resignation in her face and voice, merely an expression of the physical listlessness of despair? There was about her now that peculiar dignity which belongs less to the human creature than to the gravity of the moment in which he stands; and he remembered vividly that he had never watched any soul in the supreme crisis of its experience without the stirring in himself of a strange sentiment of reverence. Even the most abandoned was covered in that exalted hour by some last rag of honour.

"Then you have suffered great pain?" he asked, because no other words came to him that he could utter.

"Weeks ago—yes—but not now. It does not hurt me now."

"And you thought, yourself, that it was so serious as this?

She shook her head. "Oh, no, I never thought of it. When it came I drove it off with brandy."

The absence in her of any appeal for pity moved him far more than the loudest outcry could have done.

"Poor girl!" he said, and stopped in terror, lest

he had obtruded the personal element into a situation which seemed so devoid of feeling.

"It was a pity," she returned to his surprise very quietly; and without looking at him, she spoke presently in a voice which struck him as having a strange quality of hollowness, "it was a pity; but it can't be helped. You might try and try because you're made that way, but it wouldn't, in the end, do the very least bit of good. If I live till to-morrow and get well and come out of the hospital, it will all be over just exactly what it was before. Not at first, perhaps—oh, I know, not at first!—but afterward, when things bored me, the taste would come back again."

"Hush!" he said quickly, with a forward movement, "hush! you shall not think such things!"

"The taste would come back again!" she repeated, with a kind of savage sternness. "I am not strong and the doctor told me long ago that there was no cure."

"Then he lied—there is always a cure."

"There is not—there is not," she insisted harshly, dwelling upon the words because in them she found a keen agony which relieved her lethargy of bitterness, "I am different now for a while, but it would not last. I am very tired, but after I have rested——"

"What would not last?" he broke in, as she hesitated over her unfinished sentence.

For a long pause she waited, searching in vain, he saw, for some phrase which might describe the thing she had not as yet thought out clearly in her own dazed mind. Then, at last, she spoke almost in a whisper, "the freedom."

The word gave him a sudden shock of gladness. "Then you are free to-day—you feel it now?"

She raised her hand, pushing back her faded hair, as if she would look more closely at an object which rose but dimly before her eyes.

"I want you to know all—everything," she went on slowly, "I want you to understand how low I sank—to what fearful places I came in the end. At first it was merely discontent, and I felt that it was only happiness I wanted. I loved him—for a time, I think, I really loved him—you know whom I mean—but at last, when I began to weary him, when he knew what I took, he cursed me and left me alone in the street one night. Then a devil was let loose within me—I wanted hell, and I went further—further."

Her voice was still lifeless, but while she spoke he felt his teeth bite into his lips with a force which stung him to the consciousness of what she said. There awoke in him a triumph, almost a glory in the rage he felt, and he knew now why men had always believed in a hell—why they had even come at last to hope for it.

"I never meant to come back," she began again, after a pause in which the tumult of his feeling seemed to fill the air with violence, "but I had reached the end of wretchedness, I was tired and hungry, and nothing that happened really mattered. If you had told me to go away I don't think that I should have cared. I meant, in that case, to sell my coat for a bottle of brandy, and to put an end to it all while I had the courage of drink."

Her bent disordered head trembled slightly, but

she appeared to him to have passed in her misery beyond the bounds where any human sympathy could be of use. She was no longer his wife, nor he her husband; she was no longer even a fellow mortal between whom and himself there might be some common ground of understanding. Absolutely alone and unapproachable, he knew that she had reached the ultimate desolation of her soul.

"It was because you did not send me away that I have told you," she said quietly. "It is because, too, I want you to know that I—understand."

To the end her thoughts were but poor faltering, half-developed things; yet he knew what she meant to say, though she, herself, had divined it only through some pathetic, dumb instinct.

"I think I know what you mean," he said presently, when it appeared to him that her confession was over; but after he had spoken she took up her sentence with the dead calm in which she had come to rest.

"There's no use saying that I'm sorry and yet—I am sorry."

Her look of weariness was so great that with the words she seemed to lose instantly her remaining strength; and he gathered in her silence, an impression that she was reaching blindly out to him for help.

"Promise me that you will stay with me as long as they will let you?" she implored, with a quick return to her convulsion of childish terror.

He promised readily; but when the time came for her to go, she had entirely recovered her aspect of listless fortitude, and during the short drive to the hospital, she talked, without stopping, of perfectly

indifferent subjects—of the dust in the street, the deserted look of the closed houses, and of the wedding present she wished to buy for a maid who was to be married in the coming week.

"Let it be something really nice," she asked, and this single request marked for him, as she uttered it, a change in Connie greater than any he had seen before.

At the hospital he expected a relapse into her hysterical dread, but, to his surprise, she watched the surgical preparations with a calmness in which there was a kind of passive curiosity. While the nurse laid out her nightdress on the small white iron bed, and braided her hair in two long, slender braids, she assisted with a patient attention to such details which seemed hardly to account for the terrible event for which they prepared. Her hair, he noticed, was combed straight back from her forehead in the fashion in which she might have worn it as a little girl; and this simple change gave her an expression which was almost one of injured innocence. Age and experience were suddenly wiped out of her face, not by any act of mental illumination, but merely by the ruffles of her white nightdress and the simple childish fashion in which they had combed her hair.

When they came to take her upstairs to the operating room upon the roof, he would have gone also, but after reaching the top landing, she turned to him upon the threshold and told him that she would rather he came no farther.

"I can bear everything better alone now," she said; and so when they carried her inside he turned

away and entered the little waiting room at the other end of the hall. The place stifled him with the odours of chloroform and ether, and going to the window, he threw open the blinds and leaned out into the street. With the first breath of air in his face, he realised that it was he, and not Connie, who had turned coward at the end; and he wondered if it were merely waning vitality which had assumed in her an appearance of such natural dignity. She had lived her life in terror of imaginary horrors and now in presence of the actual suffering she could show herself to be absolutely unafraid. Not she but he, himself, now shivered at the thought of her unconscious body in the surgeon's hands, and he felt that it would be a positive relief to change places with her at the instant—to confront in her stead either the returning pangs of consciousness or the greater mystery of her unawakening.

In the small, newly painted room, which smelt of chloroform and varnish, he sat staring through the half open door to the hall where a surgeon, wearing a shirt with rolled-up sleeves, had just hurried by. A nurse passed carrying a basin from which a light steam rose; then a young doctor with a brown leather bag, and presently a second surgeon, who walked rapidly, and turned up his cuffs over his fat arms, just before he reached the threshold.

Connie was no longer his wife, Adams had told himself; and yet this fact seemed not in the least to lessen the importance of the news which he awaited. For the first time he understood clearly how trivial are any mere social relations between man and woman.

Then, while he watched the hand of the clock on the mantel drag slowly around the great staring face, he compelled his thoughts gradually to detach themselves from her helpless body, as it lay outstretched on the table across the hall, and to regather about the girlish figure he had first seen under cherry coloured ribbons. The old vibrant emotion was but ashes; try as he would he could bring back but a pale memory of that golden moment; and this emptiness where there had once been life, lessened forever in his mind the value of all purely human passion. But his personal attitude to her was lost suddenly in his wider regret that such tragedies were possible—that the girl with the delicate babyish face could have become a creature to whom vice was a desired familiar thing.

"Did the outcome lie in my hands? and might I have prevented it?" he demanded. "If I had stood in the way of her impulse, would it have turned aside from me at the last?" And the salvation of the world appeared to him to depend upon just this courageous coming between evil and the desire which it invited—for had not the soul of the weak been delivered, in spite of all moral subterfuge, into the power of the strong?

Then his vision broadened, and he looked from Connie's life to the lives of men and women who were more fortunate than she; but all human existence, everywhere one and the same, showed to him as the ceaseless struggle after the illusion of a happiness which had no part in any possession nor in any object. He thought of Laura, with the radiance of her illusion still upon her; of Gerty, groping after

the torn and soiled shreds of hers; of Kemper, stripped of his and yet making the pretence that it had not left him naked; of Perry Bridewell, dragging his through the defiling mire that led to emptiness; and then of all the miserable multitude of those that live for pleasure. And he saw them, one and all, bound to the wheel which turned even as he looked.

The door across the hall opened and they brought Connie out, breathing quietly and still unconscious. He followed the stretcher downstairs; but after they had placed her upon the bed, he came back again and sat down, as before, in the little stuffy room. Presently he would go home, he thought, but as the night wore on, he became too exhausted for further effort, and closing his eyes at last, he fell heavily asleep.

When he awoke the day was already breaking, and the electric light burned dimly in the general wash of grayness. About him the atmosphere had a strangely sketchy effect, as if it had been laid on crudely with a few strokes from a paint brush.

The window was still open, and going over to it he leaned out and stood for several minutes, too tired to make the necessary effort to collect his thoughts, while he looked across the sleeping city to the pale amber dawn which was beginning to streak the sky with colour. The silence was very great; in the faint light the ordinary objects upon which he gazed—the familiar look of the houses and the streets—appeared to him less the forms of a material substance than the result of some shadowy projection of mind. All the earth and sky showed suddenly as belonging to this same transient manifestation of thought; and

gradually, as he stood there, his perceptions were reinforced by a sense which is not that of the eye nor of the ear. He neither saw nor heard, yet he felt that the spirit had moved toward him on the face of the dawn; and the "I" was not more evident to his illumined consciousness than was the "Thou." He beheld God, with the vision which is beyond vision; the light of his eyes, the breath of his body were less plain to him than was the mystery of his soul. And the universal life, he saw—spirit and matter, fibre and impulse, vibration of atom and quiver of aspiration—was but an agonised working out into this consciousness of God. With the revelation his own life was changed as by a miracle of nature; right became no longer difficult, but easy; and not the day only, but his whole existence and the end to which it moved were made as clear to him as the light before his eyes.

Again he thought of Laura, still under the troubled radiance of her illusion, and his heart dissolved in sympathy, not for her only, but for all mankind—for Kemper, whom she loved, for Gerty, for Connie, for Perry Bridewell. "They seek for happiness, but it is mine," he thought; "and because they seek it first, it will keep away from them forever. It is not to be found in pleasure, nor in the desire of any object, nor in the fulfilment of any love—for I, who have none of these things, am happier than they."

He turned away from the window toward the door, and it was at this instant that one of the nurses ran up to him.

"We thought you had gone home," she said, "so we have rung you up by telephone for an hour——"

She stopped and paused hesitating for an instant; then meeting the quiet question in his look, she added simply, "Your wife died, still unconscious, an hour ago."

CHAPTER V

Treats of the Poverty of Riches

On the morning of Connie's death, Gerty, dropping in shortly before luncheon, brought the news to Laura.

"Do you know for once in my life my social instinct has failed me," she confessed in her first breath, "I am perfectly at a loss as to how the situation should be met. Ought one to ignore her death or ought one not to?"

"Do you mean," asked Laura, "that you can't decide whether to write to him or not?"

"Of course that's a part of it, but, the main thing is to know in one's own mind whether one ought to regard it as an affliction or a blessing. It really isn't just to Providence to be so undecided about the character of its actions—particularly when in this case it appears to have arranged things so beautifully to suit everybody who is concerned."

"It was, to say the least, considerate," remarked Laura, with the cynical flavour she adopted occasionally from Kemper or from Gerty, "and it is certainly a merciful solution of the problem, but does it ever occur to you," she added more earnestly, "to wonder what would have happened if she hadn't died?"

"Oh, she simply had to die," said Gerty, "there was nothing else that she could do in decency—not that

she would have been greatly influenced by such a necessity," she commented blandly.

"I'd like all the same to know how he would have met the difficulty, for that he would have met it, I am perfectly assured."

"Well, I, for one, can afford to leave my curiosity unsatisfied," responded Gerty; then she added in a voice that was almost serious. "Do you know there's really something strangely loveable about the man. I sometimes think," she concluded with her fantastic humour, "that I might have married him myself with very little effort on either side."

"And lived happily forever after on the *International Review?*"

"Oh, I don't know but what it would be quite as easy as to live on clothes. I don't believe poverty, after all, is a bit worse than boredom. What one wants is to be interested, and if one isn't, life is pretty much the same in a surface car or in an automobile. I don't believe I should have minded surface cars the least bit," she finished pensively.

"Wait till you've tried them—I have."

"What really matters is the one great thing," pursued Gerty with a positive philosophy, "and money has about as much relation to happiness as the frame has to the finished picture—all it does is to show it off to the world. Now I like being shown off, I admit—but I'd like it all the better if there were a little more of the stuff upon the canvas."

"If you were only as happy as I am!" said Laura softly.

For a moment Gerty looked at her with a sweetness in which there was an almost maternal

understanding. "I wish I were, darling," was what she answered.

Her hard, bright eyes grew suddenly wistful, and she looked at Laura as if she would pierce through the enveloping flesh to the soul within. Of all the people she had ever known Laura was the only one, she had sometimes declared, who had never lied to her. The world had lied to her, Kemper had lied to her, Perry had lied to her more than all; and she had come at last to feel, almost without explaining it to herself, that the truth was in Laura as in some obscure, mystic sense the sacrament was in the bread and wine upon the altar. Though she herself was quite content to slip away from her ideals, she felt that to believe in somebody was as necessary to her life as the bread she ate. It made no difference that she should number among the profane multitude who found their way back to the fleshpots, but her heart demanded that her friend should remain constant to the prophetic vision and the promised land. Laura was not only the woman whom she loved, she had become to her at last almost a vicarious worship. What she couldn't believe Laura believed in her stead; where she was powerless even to be good, Laura became not only good but noble. And through all her friendship, from that first day at school to the present moment, she remembered now that no hint of jealousy had ever looked at her from Laura's eyes. "A thrush could hardly borrow the plumage of a paroquet," Trent had said; and the brilliant loveliness which had disturbed the peace of other women she had known, had produced in Laura only an increasing delight, a more fervent rapture. As she looked on the delicate,

poetic face of the woman before her, she found herself asking, almost in terror, if it were possible that her friend was not only reconciled but positively enamoured of the world? Had Laura, also, entered into a rivalry which would be as relentless and more futile than her own? Would she, too, waste her life in an effort to give substance to a shadow and to render permanent the most impermanent of earthly things? But the question came and went so abruptly that the minute afterward she had entirely forgotten the passage of it through her mind.

"What a bore of a summer I shall have," she observed lightly, with one of those swift changes of subject so characteristic of her restless temperament. "The doctor has ordered me back to camp in the Adirondacks, and unless Arnold and yourself take pity on me heaven knows whether I'll be any better than a fungus by the autumn."

She was arranging her veil before the mirror as she spoke, and she paused now to survey with a dissatisfied frown one of the large black spots which had settled across her nose. "I told Camille I couldn't stand dots like these," she remarked with an equally irrelevant flash of irritation.

"Of course I'll come for July if you ask me," replied Laura, ignoring the question of the veil for the sake of the more important issue, "I can't answer for Arnold, but I think it's rather what he's looking forward to."

"Oh, he told me yesterday that he'd come if I could persuade you. He didn't have the good manners to leave me in doubt as to what the attraction for him would be."

Laura's happy laugh rewarded her. "This will be the first summer he's spent in America for ten years," she replied, "so I hope he'll find me worth the sacrifice of Europe."

"Then he's really given up his trip abroad for you?"

"There's hardly need to ask that—but don't you think it a quite sufficient reason?"

"Oh, I guess so," returned Gerty carelessly. "Once I'd have been quite positive about it, but that was in the days when I was a fool. Now I'm not honestly sure that you're doing wisely to let him stay. A man is perfectly capable of making a sacrifice for a woman in the heat of emotion, but there are nine chances to one that he never forgives her for it afterward. Take my advice, my dear, and simply *make* him go—shove the boat off yourself if there's no other way. He'll probably love you ten times more while he's missing you than he will be able to do through a long hot summer at your side."

"Gerty, Gerty, how little you know love!" said Laura.

"My dear, I never pretended to. I've given my undivided time and attention to men."

"Well, he doesn't want in the least to go—he'll tell you so himself when you see him—but I do wish that your views of life weren't quite so awful."

Gerty was still critically regarding her appearance in the mirror, and before answering she ran her hand lightly over the exquisite curve of her hip in her velvet gown.

"I'm sorry they strike you that way," she responded amiably, "because they are probably what your own will be five years from now. Then I may positively

count on you both for July?" she asked without the slightest change in her flippant tone, "and I'll try to decoy Billy Lancaster for August. He's still young enough to find the virgin forest congenial company."

"But I thought Perry hated him!" exclaimed Laura, in surprise.

"He does—perfectly—but I can't see that you've made an argument out of that. Billy's really very handsome—I wish you knew him—he's one of the few men of my acquaintance who has any hair left on the top of his head."

Her flippancy, her shallowness left Laura for a minute in doubt as to how she should accept her words. Then rising from her chair, she laid her restraining hands on Gerty's shoulders.

"My darling, do be careful," she entreated.

The shoulders beneath her hands rose in an indifferent shrug. "Oh, I've been careful," laughed Gerty, "but it isn't any fun. Perry isn't careful and he gets a great deal more out of life than I do."

"A great deal more of what?" demanded Laura.

For an instant Gerty thought attentively, while the mocking gayety changed to a serious hardness upon her face.

"More forgetfulness," she answered presently. "That's what we all want isn't it? Call it by what name you will—religion, dissipation, morphia—what we are all trying to do is to intoxicate ourselves into forgetting that life is life."

"But it isn't what I want," insisted Laura, "I want to feel everything and to know that I feel it."

"Well, you're different," rejoined Gerty. "What

I'm after is to be happy, and I care very little what form it takes or what kind of happiness mine may be. I've ceased to be particular about the details even—if Billy Lancaster is my happiness I'll devour him and never waste an idle moment in regret. Why should I?—Perry doesn't."

"So there's an end to Perry?"

"An end! Oh, you delicious child, there's only a beginning. Perry's cult is the inaccessible—present him with all the virtues and he will run away; ignore him utterly and he'll make your life insupportable by his presence. For the last twenty-four hours I assure you he's stuck to me—like a briar."

"Then it's all for Perry—I mean this Billy?" asked Laura.

Gerty shook her head while her brows grew slowly together in an expression of angry bitterness.

"It was in the beginning," she responded, "but I'm not sure that it is now—not entirely at any rate. The boy's worship is incense to my nostrils, I suppose. Yes, I've always been a monument of indifference to men, but I confess to an increasing enthusiasm for Billy's looks."

"An enthusiasm which Perry doesn't share?"

The laughter in Gerty's voice was a little sad. "I declare it really hurts me that I've ceased to notice. The poor silly man offered to give up his golf to go motoring with me yesterday afternoon, and I went and was absolutely bored to death. I couldn't help thinking how much more interesting Billy is."

Her veil was at last adjusted to her satisfaction; and with a last brilliant glance, which swept her entire figure, she turned from the mirror and paused to draw

on her gloves while she bent over and kissed Laura upon the cheek.

"Goodbye, dear, if Billy turns out to be any real comfort, I'll share him with you."

"Oh, I have a Billy of my own!" retorted Laura; and though her words were mirthful there was a seriousness in her look which lasted long after the door had closed upon her friend. She was thinking of Adams, wondering if she should write to him, and how she should word her note; and whether any expression of sympathy would not sound both trivial and absurd? Then it seemed to her that there was nothing that she could say because she realised that she stood now at an impassable distance from him. The connection of thought even which had existed between them was snapped at the instant; and she felt that she was no longer interested in the things which had once absorbed them. The friendship was still there, she supposed, but the spirit of each, the thoughts, the very language, had become strangely different, and she told herself that she could no longer speak to him since she had lost the power to speak in any words he might understand.

"How can I pretend to value what no longer even interests me?" she thought, "and if I attempt to explain—if I tell him that my whole nature has changed because I have chosen one thing from out the many—what possible good, after all, could come of putting this into words? Suppose I say to him quite frankly: 'I am content to let everything else go since I have found happiness?' And yet is it true that I have found it? and how do I know that this is really happiness, after all?"

It seemed to her, as she asked the question, that her whole life dissolved itself into the answer; and she became conscious again of the two natures which dwelt within her—of the nature which lived and of the nature which kept apart and questioned. She remembered the night after her first meeting with Kemper and the conviction she had felt then that her destiny lay mapped out for her in the hand of God. Her soul on that night had seemed, in the words of the quaint old metaphor, a vase which she held up for God to fill. The light had run over then, but now, she realised with a pang, it had ceased to shine through her body, and her vase was empty. Even love had not filled it for her as her dream had done.

Again she asked if it were happiness, and still she could find no answer. The quickened vibration of the pulses, the concentration of thought upon a single presence, the restless imagination which leaped from the disappointment of to-day to the possible fulfilment of to-morrow—these things were bound up in her every instant, and yet could she, even in her own thoughts, call these things happiness? She told off her minutes by her heartbeats; but there were brief suspensions of feeling when she turned to ask herself if in all its height and force and vividness there was still no perceptible division between agony and joy.

For at times the way grew dark to her and she felt that she stumbled blindly in a strange place. From the heights of the ideal she had come down to the ordinary level of the actual; and she was as ignorant of the forces among which she moved as a bird in the air is ignorant of a cage. Gerty alone,

she knew, was familiar with it all—had travelled step by step over ther oad before her—yet, she realised that she found no help in Gerty, nor in any other human being—for was it not ordained in the beginning that every man must come at last into the knowledge of the spirit only through the confirming agony of flesh?

"No, I am not happy now because he is not utterly and entirely mine," she thought, "there are only a few hours of the day when he is with me—all the rest of the twenty-four he leads a life of which I know nothing, which I cannot even follow in my thoughts. Whom does he see in those hours? and of what does he think when I am not with him? Next week in the Adirondacks we shall be together without interruption, and then I shall discern his real and hidden self—then I shall understand him as fully as I wish to be understood." And that coming month appeared to her suddenly as luminous with happiness. Here, now, she was dissatisfied and incapable of rest, but just six days ahead of her she saw the beginning of unspeakable joy. An impatient eagerness ran through her like a flame and she began immediately the preparations for her visit.

CHAPTER VI

The Feet of the God

When Kemper, in an emotional moment, had declared that he would give up his trip to Europe, he had expected that Laura would see in the sacrifice a convincing proof of the stability of his affection; but, to his surprise, she had accepted the suggestion as a shade too much in the natural order of events. Europe, empty of his presence, would have been in her eyes a desert; and that any grouping of mountains or arrangement of buildings could offer the slightest temptation beside the promised month in the Adirondacks appeared to her as entirely beyond the question. If the truth were told he did immeasurably prefer the prospect of a summer spent by her side, but he felt at the same time—though he hardly admitted this even to himself—that in remaining in America he was giving up a good deal of his ordinary physical enjoyments. It was not that he wanted in the very least to go; he felt merely that he ought to have been seriously commended because he stayed away. Since he had never relinquished so much as a day's pleasure for any woman in the past, he was almost overcome by appreciation of his present generosity.

For a time the very virtue in his decision produced in him the agreeable humour which succeeds any

particular admiration for one's own conduct. Of all states of mind the complacent suavity resulting from self-esteem is, perhaps, the most pleasantly apparent in one's attitude to others; and no sooner had Kemper assured himself that he had made an unusual sacrifice for Laura than he was rewarded by the overwhelming conviction that she was more than worth it all. In some way peculiar to the emotions her value increased in direct relation to the amount of pleasure he told himself he had given up for her sake.

When at last he had freed himself from a few financial worries he had lingered to attend to, and was hurrying toward her in the night express which left New York, he assured himself that now for the first time he was comfortably settled in a state which might be reasonably expected to endure. The careless first impulse of his affection would wane, he knew —it were as useless to regret the inevitable passing of the spring—but beyond this was it not possible that Laura might hold his interest by qualities more permanent than any transient exaltation of the emotions? He thought of the soul in her face rather than of the mere changing accident of form—of the smile which moved like an edge of light across her eyes and lips—and this rare spiritual quality in her appearance appealed to him at the instant as vividly as it had done on the first day he saw her. This charm of strangeness had worn with him as nothing in the domain of the sensations had worn in his life before.

In the smoking car, when he entered it a little later, he found a man named Barclay, whom he saw sometimes at his club; and they sat talking together until long after midnight. Barclay was a keen,

aggressively energetic person, who lived in a continual rush of affairs, which had not kept him from a decided over-development about the waist. He was married to an invalid wife, who, as he now told Kemper, was threatened with consumption and condemned to spend the whole year in the Adirondacks. Kemper had seen her once, and though she was neither pretty nor intelligent, he remembered her with respect as the owner of a property of forty millions. The knowledge of this fact covered her with a certain distinction in his mind, and because of it he condoned almost unconsciously the absence in her of any more personal attraction than that of wealth. The marriage, so far as he could judge, had been, from Barclay's point of view, entirely satisfactory—domestic affairs occupied no place whatever in the man's existence, which was devoted exclusively to speculation in stocks; and he had solved the eternal problem of philosophy by reducing life, not to a formula, but to a figure. Of scandal there had never blown the faintest breath about him; he paid apparently as little attention to other women as to his wife; and money, Kemper decided now, not without an irrational envy, appeared to satisfy as well as absorb his every instant.

"Yes, it's a great thing to get back to the woods now and then," Barclay was saying, "I usually manage to run up for Sunday—and then I find time to look over all the news of the week."

By "news," Kemper was aware he meant only the changes in the stock market; but his recognition that the man had not so much as a casual interest above the accumulation of wealth, did not detract in the

least from the admiration with which Barclay inspired him. This was a life that counted! he thought with generous enthusiasm; and success incarnate, he felt, was riding beside him in the train.

Barclay had drawn a paper from his pocket, and was following the list of figures with the point of his toothpick. Though there was but one subject upon which he possessed even the rudiments of knowledge, the fact that he could speak with authority in a single department of life had conferred upon him a certain dignity of manner; and so Kemper, as he fell into conversation with him, found himself wishing that he might arrange to be thrown with him during the month of his vacation. Money, though he himself was ignorant of it, possessed almost as vital an attraction for him as he found in love.

But the next morning, when he descended from the train and saw Laura awaiting him against a green background of forest, all recollection of Barclay and his financial genius, was swept from his thoughts. As he looked at her small distinguished figure, and met her charming eyes, radiant with love, he told himself that he had, indeed, got to the good place in his life at last. The pressure of her hand, the surrender in her look, the tremor of her voice, appealed to his inflammable senses with a freshness which he found as delicious as the dawn in which they stood.

"To think that I'm only beginning to live when I've past forty years!" he exclaimed, as they rolled in the little cart over the forest road.

Laura held the reins, and while she drove he flung his arm about her with a boyish laugh.

"But this is heavenly—how did you manage it?" he asked.

"Oh, I came alone in the cart because I wanted these first minutes all to ourselves," she answered, "I didn't want even Gerty to see how happy we could be." And it seemed to her as she spoke that all that she had demanded of happiness was fulfilled at last.

A week later she could still tell herself that the dream was true. Kemper had thrown himself into his love making with all the zest, as he said, of his college days; and there was in his complete absorption in it something of the exclusive attention he devoted to a game of billiards. It was a law of his nature that he should live each minute to its utmost and let it go; and this romance of the forest was less an idyl to him than a delicious experience which one must enjoy to the fullest and have over. There were moments even when Laura saw his temperamental impatience awake in his face, as if his thoughts were beginning already to plunge from the fruition of to-day after the capricious possibility which lies in to-morrow. In the midst of the forest, under the gold and green of the leaves, she realised at times that his moods were more in harmony with the city streets and the rush of his accustomed eager life.

And yet to Kemper the month was full of an enchantment which belonged half to his actual existence and half to some fairy stories he remembered from his childhood. It was more beautiful than the reality, but still it was not real; and this very beauty in it reminded him at times of the vanishing loveliness which results from a mere chance effect—of the sunlight on the green leaves or the flutter of Laura's

blue gown against the balsam. In the very intensity of his enjoyment there was at certain instants almost a terrified presentiment; and following this there were periods of flagging impulse when he asked himself indifferently if a life of the emotions brought as its Nemesis an essential incapacity for love? If Laura had only kept up the pursuit a little longer, he complained once in a despondent mood, if she had only fluttered her tinted veil as skilfully as a woman of the world might have done. "Yet was it not for this unworldliness—for this lack of artifice in her—that I first loved her?" he demanded, indignant with her, with nature, with himself. She had surrendered her soul, he realised, with the frankness of inexperience; the excitement of the chase was now over forever, and he saw stretching ahead of him only the radiant monotony of love. Was the satiety with which, in these listless instants, he looked forward to it merely, he questioned bitterly, the inevitable end to which his life had reached?

Lying in a hammock on the broad piazza of Gerty's camp, he asked himself the question while he watched Laura, who stood at a little distance examining some decorations for the hall.

"Oh, I'd choose the green tapestry by all means," he heard her say; and he told himself as he listened to the ordinary words that if she had been a perfect stranger to him he would have known her voice for the voice of a woman who was in love. Was she really lacking, he asked himself in amusement, in the quality which he called for want of a better phrase—"the finesse of sentiment?" or was the angelic candour of her emotion only the outward expression of that

largeness of nature which inspired him at times with a respect akin to awe? The absence of any coquetry in her attitude impressed him as the final proof of her inherent nobility; and yet there were instants when he admitted almost in spite of himself, that he would have relished the display of a little amorous evasion. Laura, he believed, was perfectly capable of a great emotion, but the great emotion, after all, he concluded humorously, was less conducive to his immediate enjoyment than was the small flirtation.

The two women were still discussing the bit of tapestry; and while he watched them, a ray of sunlight, piercing the bough of a maple beside the porch, fell with a charming brightness upon Gerty's hair. Each brilliant red strand, he noticed, appeared to leap instantly into life and colour.

It was pure effect, a mere creation of changing light and shade; and yet, as he looked, he was aware of a sudden tremor in his blood. The time had been when Gerty had rather liked him, he remembered —or was it, after all, merely that he had exaggerated the subtle suggestion in her look? Something had passed between them—just what it was, he could hardly recall with distinctness—a mere fervent glance, perhaps a half spoken phrase, or at most a cousinly kiss which had contained the passion of a lover. The incident had passed, and though he told himself now that it had vanished entirely from his memory, he felt that it had left behind a vague longing that it might some day occur again.

"I can't for the life of me remember what it was, nor how it happened," he thought. "It was out of the question, of course, that I should fall in love

with Perry's wife—and yet, by Jove, I'd like to know what she felt about it all. I'm glad," he added earnestly after a moment, "that Laura doesn't happen to be the flirtatious kind." Nevertheless he continued to wonder, as he looked at the sunlight on Gerty's hair, if there could have been, after all, a grain of truth in those hints she had so carelessly let fall.

. . . . . .

Early in August Laura was summoned home by the illness of Angela; and Kemper, after a few days spent with her in the city, started upon a yachting cruise which occupied him for two weeks. On the day of his return, when as yet he had not seen Laura he, accidentally ran across Adams shortly before the luncheon hour.

"Look here, old chap, let's lunch together at the club," he suggested, adding with a laugh, "if I let you go now, heaven knows when I'll be so fortunate as to knock up against you any more."

Adams readily agreed; and a little later, as they sat opposite each other at table, he showed, as usual, a sincere enough enjoyment of his companion's society. Though he had never taken Kemper as he said, "quite seriously," there were few men whom he found it pleasanter to meet at dinner.

"I wish you came more in my way," he observed, while Kemper gave the order, with the absorbed attention he devoted to such details, "I don't believe I've laid eyes on you but once in the last six months."

"Oh, you've something better to think of," returned Kemper carelessly. "Do you know," he pursued after a moment's thought, "I'm sometimes

tempted to wish that I could change place with you and get beaten into shape for some serious work. It's the only thing in life that counts, when you come to think of it," he concluded with an irritation directed less against himself than against his fate.

"Well, I can't say I'd object to standing in your shoes for a while," rejoined Adams, "I've a taste for the particular brand of cigar you smoke."

"Oh, they're good enough—in fact everything is good enough—it comes too easily, that's the trouble. I've never found anything yet that was seriously worth trying for."

Adams regarded him for a moment with a smile, to which his whimsical humour lent a peculiar attraction.

"I, on the other hand, have tried pretty hard for some things I didn't get," he answered, "the difference between us, I guess, is that I had a tough time in my youth and you didn't. A man's middle age is usually a reaction from his youth."

"I've never had a tough time anywhere," replied Kemper, almost in disgust, "it's been too soft—that's the deuced part of it. And yet I've got the stuff in me for a good fight if the opportunity would only come my way."

The expression of satiety—of moral weariness—was etched indelibly beneath the brightness of his smile; and yet, Adams, looking at him, remembered, a little bitterly, that this man had won from him the woman whom he loved. To Kemper belonged both her body and her spirit; the touch of her hand no less than the charm of her intellect! At the thought his

old human longing for her awoke and stirred restlessly again in his heart.

"Yes, the only thing is to have one particular interest," resumed Kemper, "to occupy oneself with something that is eternally worth while. Now, look at Barclay—I went up in the train with him to the Adirondacks, and, upon my word, I never envied a man more in my whole life. You know Barclay, don't you?"

Adams nodded. "I'd find a little of his financial ability rather useful myself," he observed. Then he broke into a boyish laugh at a recollection the name aroused, "the last time I had a talk with him was at the beginning of our war with Spain, and he told me he was interested in news from the front because he happened to own some Spanish bonds."

Kemper joined in the laugh. "Oh, he's narrow, of course," he replied, "but all the same I'd like the chance to get in his place. By Jove, I don't believe he's ever bored a minute of the day!" And it seemed to him, as he thought of Barclay, that his own life held nothing for him but boredom from this time on.

CHAPTER VII

In Which Kemper is Puzzled

Late in October Kemper went South for a couple of weeks shooting; and it was not until the first day of November that he parted from his companions of the trip and returned to New York. He had enjoyed every minute of his absence—until the last few days when the strangeness appeared, somehow, to have worn from his out-door life—and as he drove now, on the bright autumn afternoon, from the station to his rooms, he was agreeably aware that he had never felt physically or mentally in better shape. After a fortnight spent away from civilisation, he found a refreshing excitement in watching the crowd in Fifth Avenue, the passing carriages, and particularly the well-dressed figures of the women in their winter furs. Taken all in all life was a pretty interesting business, he admitted; and he remembered with eagerness that he would see Laura again before the day was over. Though he had barely thought of her once during the past two weeks, this very forgetfulness served to surround her with the charm of novelty in his awakened memory.

A woman in a sable coat rolled past him in an automobile; and his eyes followed her with an admiration which seemed strangely mixed with a vague longing in his blood—a longing which was in some

way produced by the animated street, the changing November brightness and the crispness of frost which was in the air. Then he caught sight of a milliner's pretty assistant carrying a hat box along the sidewalk, and his gaze hung with pleasure upon her trim and graceful figure in a cheap cloth coat bordered with imitation ermine. A feeling of benevolence, of universal good will pervaded his heart; his chest expanded in a sigh of thankfulness, and it seemed to him that he asked nothing better than to be alive. He was in the mood when a man is grateful to God, charitable to himself and generous to his creditors.

The cab stopped before his door, and while he paid the man, he gave careful directions to Wilkins about the removal of his shooting traps. Then he entered the apartment house, and passing the elevator with his rapid step, went gayly humming up the staircase.

On the third landing he paused a moment to catch his breath, and as he laid his hand, the instant afterward, on the door of his sitting-room, he became aware of a faint, familiar, and yet almost forgotten perfume, which entered his nostrils from the apartment before which he stood. The perfume, distant as it was, revived in him instantly, with that curious association between odours and visual memory, a recollection which might otherwise have slumbered for years in his brain—and though he had not thought of Jennie Alta once during the summer and autumn months, there rose immediately before him now the memory of her dressing table with the silver box in which she kept some rare highly scented powder. Every incident of his acquaintance with her thronged in a disordered series through his brain; and it was

with an odd presentiment of what awaited him, that he entered his sitting room and found her occupying a chair before his fireside. When she sprang up and faced him in her coarsened beauty, it seemed the most natural thing in the world that he should accept the fact of her presence with merely an ironic protest.

"So you've turned up again," he remarked, as he held out his hand with a smile, "I was led to believe that the last parting would be final."

"Oh, it was," she answered lightly, "but there's an end even to finality, you know."

The flute-like soprano of her voice fell pleasantly upon his ears, and as he looked into her face he told himself that it was marvellous how well she had managed to preserve an effect of youthfulness. Under the flaring wings in her hat her eyes were still clear and large and heavy lidded, her thin red lips still held the shape of their sensual curve. A white fur boa was thrown carelessly about her neck, and he remembered that underneath it, encircling her short throat there was the soft crease of flesh which the ancient poets had named "the necklace of Venus."

"Well, I can but accept this visit as a compliment, I suppose," he observed with amiable indifference, "it means—doesn't it? that you won your fight about the opera contract?"

An expression of anger—of the uncontrolled, majestic anger of a handsome animal, awoke in her face, and she pulled off her long white glove as if seeking to free herself from some restraint of custom. Her hand, he noticed, with a keen eye for such feminine details, was large, roughly shaped and over fleshy about the wrist.

"I'd starve before I'd sing again by that old contract," she responded. "No, it's not opera—Parker refused to pay me what I asked and I held out to the end—I shall sing in concert for the first time, and I shan't be happy until I have every seat in the opera house left empty."

He laughed with an acute enjoyment of her repressed violence. "Oh, you're welcome to mine," he returned good-humouredly, "but what is the day of your great first battle?"

"Not until December. I'm going West and South before I sing in New York."

"Then you aren't here for much of a stay, after all?"

She shook her head and the orange coloured wings in her hat waved to and fro.

"Only a few days at a time. After Christmas I sail back again. In February I'm engaged for Monte Carlo."

Then her expression underwent a curious change—as if personality, colour, passion pulsed into her half averted face—and the hard professional tones in which she had spoken were softened as if by an awakening memory.

"So you still keep my portrait, I see," she observed, lifting her eyes to the picture above the mantel, "you don't hate me, then, so bitterly as I thought."

He shrugged his shoulders with the gesture he had acquired abroad.

"I did take it down, but it left a smudge on the wall, so I had to put it back again."

"Then you sometimes think of me?" she enquired, with curiosity.

"Not when I can help it," he retorted, laughing.

His ironic pleasantry stung her into an irritation which showed plainly in her face; and she appeared, for the first time, to bend her intelligence toward some definite achievement.

"And is that always easy?" she asked, in a tone of mere flippant banter.

A petty impulse of revenge lent sharpness to his voice. "Easier than you think," he responded coolly.

"Well, I suppose, I'll have to take the punishment," she answered, as lightly as before; and then turning to the mantelpiece again, she raised her glance to the portrait. "I never liked it," she commented frankly, "he's got me in an unnatural position—I never stood like that in my life—and there's an open smirk about the mouth."

He saw her face in the admirable pose which he remembered—the chin held slightly forward, the cheek rounded upward, the eyes uplifted—and for an instant he waited, half hoping that her voice of wine and honey would roll from between her lips. But she was frugal of her notes, he recalled the instant afterward.

"I've always considered it a pretty fair likeness," he remarked.

"Then you've always considered me pretty hideous," she flashed back in annoyance.

As she swung round upon the hearthrug, the white fur boa slipped from her throat, and he saw "the necklace of Venus" above the string of opals that edged her collarless lace blouse.

"On the contrary I admire you very much when

you are in a good humour," he observed in his genial raillery.

"Then you thought I had a temper?"

He laughed softly, as if at a returning recollection. "A perfectly artistic one," he answered.

Her annoyance disappeared beneath his gaze, and the smile he had but half forgotten—a faint sweet ripple of expression, which seemed less the result of an inner working of intelligence than of some outward fascination in the curve of mouth and chin—hovered, while he watched her attentively, upon her bright red lips. In the making of her the soul he recognised had dissolved into the senses; and yet the accident of her one exquisite gift had conferred upon her the effect, if not the quality of genius. Because of the voice in her throat she appeared to stand apart by some divine election of nature.

"I believe I did slap your face once," she confessed, laughing, "but I begged your pardon afterward—and you must admit that you were sometimes trying."

"Perhaps—but what's the use of bringing all this up now? It's well over, isn't it?"

"Isn't it?" she repeated softly; and he had an odd impression that her voice was melting into liquid honey. The thought made him laugh aloud and at the sound she relapsed quickly into her indifferent attitude.

"Of course, it's over," she resumed promptly. "If it were not over—if I didn't feel myself entirely safe—do you think that I'd ever dare come back again?"

The absence of any hint of emotion in her words produced in him an agreeable feeling of security, and for the first time he went so close to her that he might almost have touched her hand.

"Safe?" he repeated, smiling, "then were you ever really in danger?"

Her glance puzzled him, and she followed it a moment afterward with a sentence which had the effect of increasing, rather than diminishing, the obscurity in which he floundered.

"In danger of losing my head, do you mean?" she asked, "Wasn't that question answered when I ran away?"

But the next instant she burst into a laugh of ridicule, and threw herself back into the chair upon the hearthrug, with the particular fall of drapery by which she delighted the eyes of her audience in the opera house.

"I asked your man to bring me tea, for I'm famished," she remarked; "do you think he has forgotten it?"

"He had, probably, to go out to buy the cakes," he replied, with a touch upon the bell which was immediately answered by Wilkins bearing the silver tray. As she rose to make tea, Kemper took the fur boa from her shoulders and held it for a minute to his nostrils.

"You use the same perfume, I notice," he observed.

She waited until the door had closed upon Wilkins, and then looked up, smiling, as she handed him his cup.

"There are two things one should never change," she returned, "a perfume and a lover."

With a laugh he tossed the fur upon the sofa. "By Jove, you've arrived at the conventional morality at last."

"Is it morality?" she rejoined sweetly, "I thought it was experience."

"Well, any way, you're right and I'm moral," he remarked, "the joy of living, after all, is not in having a thing, but in wanting it."

"Which proves, as I have said," she concluded, "that one love is as good as a thousand."

There was a sharp edge of ridicule to his glance; but the words he spoke were uttered from some mere impulse of audacity.

"I wonder if I taught you that?" he questioned.

Leaning slightly forward she clasped her large white hands upon her knees; and the position, while she kept it, showed plainly the rounded ample length of her figure.

"I might tell you the truth—but, after all, why should I?" she demanded.

An emotional curiosity which was almost as powerful as love flamed in his face. How much or how little did she feel? he wondered; and the vanity which was the inspiration of his largest as well as his smallest passion, dominated for the time all other impressions which she produced.

"Would it be possible for you to tell the truth if you tried?" he asked.

"I never try—all the harm on earth comes from women telling men the truth. It is the woman who tells the truth who becomes—a door mat. If I ever felt myself in danger of speaking the truth—" she hesitated for a quick breath, while her eyes drew his gaze as by a cord—"I would run away."

It was his turn to breathe quickly now. "You did run away—once."

"I ran because——" her voice was so low that he felt it like a breath upon his cheek.

"Because?" he echoed impatiently; and the vehemence in his tone wrought an immediate change in her seductive attitude. With a laugh that was almost insolent, she rose to her feet and looked indifferently down upon him.

"Oh, that's over long ago and we've both forgotten. I came to-day only to ask the honour of your presence at my first concert."

An impulse to irritate her—to provoke her into an expression of her hidden violence—succeeded quickly the curiosity she had aroused; and he felt again the fiendish delight with which, as a savage small boy, he had prodded the sleeping wild animals in their cages in the park.

"I'm not sure that I can arrange it," he responded, "I may be off on my honeymoon, you know."

"Ah, yes," she nodded while he saw a perceptible flicker of her heavy eyelids, "but when, if I'm not impertinent, does the interesting event take place? I might be able to postpone my concert," she concluded jestingly.

He shook his head. "You can't do that because I expect it to last forever."

"One usually does, I believe, but it is easy to miscalculate. Have you a photograph visible of the lady?"

He shook his head, but with the denial, his glance travelled to a picture of Laura upon his desk; and crossing the room, she took it up and returned with it to the firelight, where she dropped upon her knees in order to study it the more closely.

"Has she money?" was her first enquiry at the end of her examination.

"If she has I am not aware of it," he retorted angrily.

"Well, I wonder what you see in her," she remarked, with her attentive gaze still upon the picture, "though she looks as if she'd never let a man go if she once got hold of him."

Her vulgar insolence worked him into an uncontrollable spasm of anger; and with a smothered oath he wrenched the photograph from her and flung it into the open drawer of his desk.

"She is too sacred to me to be made the subject of your criticism," he exclaimed.

Whether she was frankly offended or unaffectedly amused he could not tell, but she burst into so musical a laugh that he found himself listening to it with positive pleasure.

"There! there! don't be foolish—I was only joking," she returned, "please don't think for one minute that it's worth my while to be jealous of you."

"I don't think so," he replied, with open annoyance, "but I wish you wouldn't come here."

She had taken up her fur and stood now wrapping it about her throat, while her eyes were fixed upon him with an expression he found it impossible to read. Was it anger, seduction, passion or disappointment? Or was it some deeper feeling than he had ever believed it possible for her face to show?

"It is the last time, I promise you," she said, "but do you know why I came this afternoon?"

"Why?—no, and I doubt if you do."

For a moment she was silent; then he watched

the curious physical fascination grow in her smile.

"I came because I had a very vivid dream about you on the boat last night," she said, "I dreamed of that evening, during the first winter, in my dressing-room after the second act in 'Faust.' I thought I had forgotten it, but in my sleep it all came clearly back again—every minute and——"

"And?" the word burst from him eagerly as he leaned toward her.

"I broke a bottle of perfume, do you remember?" her soft laugh shook in her full, white throat, "your coat still smelt of it next day, you said."

Her wonderful voice, softened now to a speaking tone, seemed to endow each word, not only with melody, but with form and colour. They became living things to him while she spoke, and the night he had almost forgotten, stood out presently as in the glow of a conflagration of his memory. He smelt again the perfume which she had spilled on his coat; he saw again the fading roses, heaped on chairs and tables, that overflowed her dressing room. It was the night of her great triumph—the eyes with which she looked at him still held the intoxication of her own music—and it was to the applause of a multitude, that, alone with her behind the scenes, he had first taken her in his arms.

"It's all over, I tell you," he said angrily; "so what's the use of this?"

"It's never over!—it's never over!" she repeated in her singing voice.

She was very close to him at last; but breaking away

with an effort, he crossed the room and laid his hand upon the door.

"It was over forever two years ago," he said, "and now good-bye!"

He held out his hand, but without taking it, she stood motionless while she looked at him with her unchanging smile.

"Then I'll let it be good-bye," she answered, "but not this way—not just like this——"

Her voice mocked him; and moved by an impulse which was half daring, half vanity, he closed the door again and came back to where she stood.

"So long as it's good-bye, I'll have it any way you wish," he said.

CHAPTER VIII

Shows that Love without Wisdom is Folly

The odd part was, he admitted next morning as he sat at breakfast, that from first to last he had not found one moment's pleasure in the society of Madame Alta. Pleasure in a suitable quantity he was inclined to regard as sufficient excuse for the most serious indiscretion; but in this case the temptation to which he had yielded appeared to him, by the light of day, to be entirely out of proportion to any actual enjoyment he had experienced. An impulse which was neither vanity nor daring, but a mixture of the two, had swept away his resolve before he was clearly aware, as he expressed it, "of the drift of the wind." He had not wanted to go with her and yet he had gone, impelled by some fury of adventure which had seemed all the time to pull against his saner inclinations.

While he ate his two eggs and his four pieces of toast, as he had done every morning for the last fifteen years, he remembered, with a mild pang of remorse, that he had not seen Laura since his return. Without doubt she had expected him last evening, had put on, probably, her most becoming gown to receive him; and the thought of her disappointment entered his heart with a very positive reproach. This reproach, short lived as it was, had the effect

of enkindling his imaginary picture of her; and the eagerness with which he now looked forward to his visit completely crowded from his mind the recollection that, but for his own fault, he might have seen her with as little effort on the evening before.

As he sat there over his breakfast, with an unfolded newspaper on the table beside him, he realised, in a proper spirit of thankfulness, that he had never felt himself to be in a more thoroughly domestic mood. His face, in which the clear red from his country trip was still visible, settled immediately into its most genial lines, while he expanded his chest with a deep breath which strained the topmost button on the new English waistcoat which he wore. The sober prospect of marriage no longer annoyed him when he thought of it, and he could even look forward complacently to seeing the same woman opposite to him at breakfast for twenty years.

"By Jove, I've come to the place when to settle down and live quietly is the best thing I can do," he concluded, as he helped himself to marmalade. "I've reached the time of life when a man has to pull up and go easily or else break to pieces. It's all very well to take one's fling in youth, but middle age is the period for retrenchment."

Then, while he still congratulated himself upon the expediency of virtue, another image appeared in his reflections, and the paternal instinct, so strong in men of his kind, responded instantly to the argument which clothed his mere natural impulse. Marriage, he told himself, would mean a son of his own, and the stability which he had always missed in any relation with a woman would be secured through the responsi-

bility which fatherhood involved. Here was the interest his life had lacked, after all—here was the explanation of that vacancy his emotions had not filled; and it appeared to him that his loves had failed in definiteness, in any vital purpose, because he had never seen himself fulfilled in the son which he now desired.

"I shouldn't wonder if this is what I've been wanting all the time," he thought; and the generous fervour, the ideal purity, he had never been able to introduce into his romances, gathered luminously about the cradle of his unborn child. It seemed to him, as he smoked his second cigar in the face of this paternal vision, that he had stumbled by accident upon the one secret of happiness which he had overlooked; and it was while the beaming effulgence of this mood still lasted, that he finished his papers, and determined to look in upon Laura on his way down town. The memory of last evening was placed at the distance of a thousand miles by his sudden change of humour, and it seemed as useless to reproach himself for an act so far beyond his present area of personality as it would have been to moralise upon an indiscretion in ancient history. A little later, as he ascended Laura's steps, he felt serenely assured that he had made the best possible disposition of his future.

To his surprise she was not in her sitting-room when he entered, and it was several minutes before she came in, very quietly and with an averted face. When he would have taken her in his arms, she drew back quickly with an indignant and wounded gesture. Her eyes were burning, but he had never heard her speak in so hard a voice.

"You were in town last night," she said, and by her look more than her words he was brought face to face with the suspicion that she was capable of a jealous outburst.

"I wanted to come, but I couldn't," he answered, with an attempt at his quizzical humour. "I rushed here as soon as I dared this morning—isn't that enough to prove something?"

Again he made a movement to take her in his arms, but her face was so unyielding that his hands, which he had outstretched, fell to his sides. From the look in her eyes he could almost believe that she had grown to hate him in the night; and at the thought his earlier impetuous emotion flamed in his heart.

"Don't lie to me," she said passionately, "there's nothing I hate so much as a lie."

"I never lied to you in my life," he answered, as he drew back with an expression of cold reproach—for it seemed to him that her attack had offered an unpardonable affront to his honour.

"When you did not come I sent a note to you—I feared something had happened—I hardly knew what—but something. The note came back. They told the messenger——" the words were wrenched out of her as by some act of bodily torture, and, at last, in spite of her struggle, she could go no further. Pausing she looked at him in silence, while her hand pressed into her bosom as if to keep down by physical force the passion which she could no longer control by a mental effort. The violence of temper which in a coarser—a more flesh-and-blood beauty—would have been repelling and almost vulgar, was in her chastened and ennobled by the ethereal quality in her outward

form—and the emotion she expressed seemed to belong less to the ordinary human impulses than to some finer rage of spirit which was independent of the gesture or the utterance of flesh.

"And you suspected what?" he demanded, in a hurt and angry voice, "you were told some story by a servant—and without waiting for my explanation—without giving me a decent chance to clear myself—you were ready, on the instant, to believe me capable—of what?"

Her suspicion worked him into a furious resentment; and the consciousness that he, himself, was at fault was swallowed up by the greater wrong of her unuttered accusation. While he spoke he was honestly of the opinion that their whole future happiness was wrecked by the fact that she believed him capable of the thing which he had done.

"I would die now before I would justify myself to you," he added.

Before the unaffected resentment in his face, she was suddenly, and without knowing it, thrown into a position of defence.

"What could I believe? What else was there for me to believe?" she asked in a muffled voice. Then, as she looked up at him, it seemed to her that for the first time she saw the man as he really was in the truth of his own nature—saw his egoism, his vanity, his shallowness and saw, too, with the same mental clearness, that he had ceased to love her. But at the instant with this vision before her, she told herself that the discovery made no difference—that it no longer mattered whether he loved or hated her. Afterward, when he had gone, her perceptions would

be blunted again and she would suffer, she knew; but now, while she stood there face to face with him, she could not feel that he bore any vital part in her existence.

"You must believe whatever your feeling for me dictates," he retorted. "I shall not stoop to meet a charge of which I am still ignorant—I have loved you," he added, "more than I have ever loved any man or woman in my life."

"You have never loved me—you do not love me now," she responded coolly.

She had not meant to speak the words; they held no particular meaning for her ears; and yet they had no sooner passed her lips than she had a strange impression that they remained like detached, living things in the space between them. Why she had spoken as she had done, she could not tell, nor why she had really cared so little at the instant when she had uttered her passionate reproach. Then she remembered a wooden figure she had once seen on the stage—a figure that walked and moved its arms and uttered sounds which resembled a human voice —and it seemed to her that she, herself, was this figure and that her gestures and the words she spoke were the result of the hidden automaton within her.

She saw him pass to the door, look back once, and then leave the room with his rapid step, and while her eyes followed him, she felt that the man who had just gone from her with that angry glance was a different individual from the man whom she still loved and for whom she would presently suffer an agony of longing. Then as the sound of the hall door closing sharply fell on her ears, she passed instantly

from the deadening lethargy of her senses into a vivid realisation of the thing which had just happened —of the meaning of the words which she had spoken and of the look which he had thrown back at her as he went. A passion of despair rose in her throat, struggling for release until it became a physical torture, and she cried out in her loneliness that nothing mattered—neither truth nor falsehood—so long as she could be brought again face to face with his actual presence.

But—if she had only known the truth!—Kemper had never desired her so ardently as in the hour when he told himself that, by his own fault, he had lost her forever; she had never shown herself so worthy to be won as when she had looked down upon him from the remoteness of her disdain. Like many men of flexible morality, he entertained a profound respect for any rigid ethical standard; and had Laura maintained her unyielding attitude, he would probably have suffered a hopeless passion for her to the end of his embittered but still elastic experience. Though he was hardly aware of it, the only virtues he could perfectly appreciate were the ones which usually present themselves in a masculine shape—courage, honour, fair play among men and chivalry to women; and it seemed to him that Laura, in exacting his entire fidelity, was acting upon an essentially masculine prerogative. The more she demanded, the more, unconsciously to himself, he felt that he was ready to surrender—and he cursed now the intervention of Madame Alta with a vehemence he would never have felt had the course of his love flowed on smoothly in spite of his relapses.

"What a damned fool I made of myself," he confessed, as he walked rapidly away from Gramercy Park. "I got no pleasure from seeing Jennie Alta—not an atom of enjoyment even—and yet I've ruined my whole life because of her, and the chances are nine to one that if I had it to go over I'd act the same blooming idiot again. And all the time I'm more in love with Laura than I've ever been with any woman in my life. Here's the whole happiness of my future swept away at a single blow."

And the domestic dream which Madame Alta had destroyed was mapped out for him by his imagination, until she seemed, not only to have prevented his marriage, but, by some singular eccentricity of feeling, to have murdered the son who had played so large a part in his confident expectations.

"But why should this have happened to me when I'm no worse than other men?" he questioned, "when I'm even better than a hundred whom I know? I've never willingly harmed any human being in my life—I've never cheated, I've never lied to get myself out of a tight place, I've never breathed a word against the reputation of any woman." He thought of Brady, who, although he was a cad and had ruined Connie Adams, was now reconciled with his wife and received everywhere he went; of Perry Bridewell whose numerous affairs had never interfered with either his domestic existence or his appetite. Beside either of these men he felt himself to glow inwardly with virtue, yet he saw that his greater decency had not in the least prevented his receiving the larger punishment; and it seemed to him that he must be pursued by some malign destiny because,

though he was so much better than Brady or Perry Bridewell, he should have been overtaken by a retribution which they had so easily escaped. An unreasonable anger against Laura pervaded his thoughts, but this very anger lent fervour to the admiration he now felt for her. He knew she loved him and if—as in the case of no other woman he had ever known—her love could be dominated and subdued by her recognition of what was due her honour, his feeling rather than his thought, assured him that he would be reduced to a moral submission approaching the abject. Though he hoped passionately that she would yield, he realised in his heart that he would adore her if she remained implacable. Love is not always pleased with reverence, but reverence, he saw dimly through some pathetic instinct for virtue, is the strongest possible hold that love can claim. He, himself, would always live in the external world of the senses, yet deep within him, half smothered by the clouds of his egoism, there was still a blind recognition of that other world beyond sense which he had shut out. To this other world, for the time at least, Laura, with all the enchantment of the distance, appeared to belong.

The morning, with its unusual burden of introspection, was, perhaps, the most miserable he had ever spent, and after he had lunched at his club—when to his surprise he found that his appetite was entirely undisturbed by his mental processes—he returned to his rooms before starting dejectedly for a long run in his automobile. But a letter from Laura was the first object he noticed upon his desk, and his afternoon plans were swept from his mind with the

beginning of her heart-broken entreaty for reconciliation. While he read it there was recognition in his thoughts for no feeling except his rapture in her recovery, and he took up his pen with a hand which trembled in the shock of his reaction from despair to happiness. Then, while he still hesitated, in a mixture of self-reproach and tenderness, there was a knock at his door, it opened and shut quickly, with an abruptness which even in inanimate things speak of excitement, and Laura, herself, breathing rapidly and very pale, came hurriedly across the room.

"I could not stay away—you did not answer my note—it would have killed me," she began brokenly; and as he stretched out his arms she threw herself into them with a burst of tears.

"Oh, you angel!" he exclaimed, in a tenderness which was almost an ecstasy of feeling; and then, moved by a passion of sympathy, he called her by every endearing name his mind could catch at or his voice utter. The depth of his nature responded in all its volume, as she lay there weeping for joy, in his arms, and in her coming to him as she had done he beheld then only an exquisite proof of her nobility of soul, of the unworldly innocence for which he loved her. In that embrace, for that one supreme instant, their spirits touched more nearly than they had ever done in the past or would ever do again in the future—for even while he held her the tide of being receded from its violence and they drew apart.

"If you had only waited I should have come to you at once," he said, looking at her in a rapture which, though he himself was ignorant of it, struggled against a disappointment because she

had shown herself to be closer to his own level than he had believed.

Drawing slightly away Laura stood shaking the tear drops from her lashes, while she regarded him with her radiant smile. The misty brightness of her eyes showed to him in an almost unreal loveliness.

"I didn't care—nothing mattered to me," she answered, "it made no difference what the world said —nor whether I lived or died."

Though the flattery of her coming moved him strongly, he found himself wishing while she spoke that she had not proved herself to be so ardently regardless of conventions—that she had appeared, for once, less natural and more worldly-wise.

"Well, I'll take you home now," he said, smiling; then as he saw her gaze, passing curiously about the room, rest enquiringly upon the portrait of Madame Alta, he broke into a laugh which sounded, for all its pleasantness, a little strained.

"That goes out of the way as soon as I can get something to cover the spot," he remarked, adding gayly, "Symonds says he will finish his portrait of me next week, and I'll hang it there until you claim it."

Her face had clouded, and without looking at him she moved toward the door. "Are you really glad that I came?" she asked abruptly, turning upon the threshold.

"Glad! My darling girl, I'm simply overjoyed. You gave me the most miserable morning of my life."

It was the truth—he knew it for the truth while

he uttered it, but, in his heart of hearts, he felt without confessing it to himself, that his love had dropped back from that divine height beyond which mere human impulse becomes ideal passion.

CHAPTER IX

Of the Fear in Love

When Laura reached the sidewalk she was seized by one of those reactions of feeling which are possible only in periods of unnatural and overstrained excitement.

"I would rather you didn't come with me now," she said, "I've promised Gerty to go to her this afternoon, and I'd honestly rather go alone."

"But I've seen nothing of you at all," he urged, "put Gerty aside—she won't mind. If she does, tell her I made you do it."

She shook her head, shrinking slightly away from him in the street. "It isn't that, but I want to be alone—to think. Come this evening and I'll be quite myself again. Only just now I—I can't talk."

In the end he had yielded, overborne by so unusual a spirit of opposition; and with a reproachful goodbye he had returned to his rooms, while she went slowly up the street in the pale autumn sunshine.

The impulse in which she had gone to him had utterly died down; and she asked herself, with a curiosity that was almost indifferent, why, since the reconciliation she had longed for was now complete, she should feel only melancholy where she had expected to find happiness? Kemper had never been more impassioned, had never shown himself to be more

thoroughly the lover—yet in some way she admitted, it had all been different from the deeper reunion she had hoped for; there had come to her even while she lay in his arms that strange, though familiar sense of unreality in her own emotion; and beneath the touch of his hands she had felt herself to be separated from him by the space of a whole inner world. Though she appeared to have got everything, she realised, with a pang of resentment directed against herself, that she had wanted a great deal more than he had had the power to bestow. Could it be that the thing she had missed was that finer sympathy of spirit without which all human passion is but the withered husk where the flower has never bloomed?

"Is it true that I must be forever content with the mere gesture of love?" she thought. "Is it true that I shall never reach his soul, which is surely there if I could but find it? Has it eluded me, after all, only because I did not know the way?"

This longing for the immortal soul of love seized her like an unquenchable thirst, until it seemed to her that all outward forms of expression — all embraces all words—were but dead earthly things until the breath of the spirit had entered in to raise them from mere trivial accidents into eternal symbols.

Then suddenly she understood, for the first time, that she had humiliated herself by going to his rooms, and she felt her cheek burn in remembering a step which she had taken, under the stress of feeling, without an instant's hesitation. It seemed to her now, when she looked back upon it, that it would have been better to have lost him forever than to have

lowered her pride in the way that she had done—but before seeing him her pride had been nothing to her, and she realised that if she felt his affection slipping from her again she would be driven to the same or even to greater lengths of self-abasement.

"But I did wrong—I have lowered myself forever in his eyes," she thought, "he can never feel the same respect for me again, and because I have lost his respect I have lost also my power to keep him constant to me in his heart."

With the confession, she was aware that a spiritual battle took place within her, and she thought of her soul, not as one but as multiple—as consisting of hosts of good and evil angels who warred against one another without ceasing. And she felt assured that presently the good or the evil host would be vanquished and that henceforth she would belong to the victorious side forever—not for this life only, but for a thousand lives and an eternal evolution along the course which she herself had chosen. A passage she had once read in an old book occurred to her, and she recalled that the writer had spoken of God as "the place of the soul." If this were so, had she not filled that place which is God with a confusion in which there was only terror and disorder.

"Why has it all happened as it has?" she demanded almost in despair. "Why did I love him in the beginning? Why did I humiliate myself in his eyes to-day?" But her motives, which appeared only as impulses, were still shrouded in the obscurity of her ignorance; and the one thing that remained clear to her was that she had struggled breathlessly for the happiness she had not possessed. Was it this desire

for happiness, she asked, which had returned to her now in the form of an avenging fury?

At the corner of Fifth Avenue, while she stopped upon the sidewalk to wait for the stage, she was joined by Mr. Wilberforce, who told her that he had just come from her house.

"I was particularly sorry to miss you," he added, "because I brought a book of poems I wanted to talk over with you—the work of a young Irishman with a touch of genius."

"Yes, yes," she responded vaguely, without knowing what she said. Literature appeared to her suddenly as the most uninteresting pursuit upon the earth, and she longed to escape from the presence of Mr. Wilberforce, because she knew that he would weary her by ceaseless allusions to books which she no longer read.

"I'm on my way to Gerty's—she made me promise to come this afternoon," she explained hurriedly, recalling with surprise that she had once found pleasure in the companionship of this ineffectual old man, with his placid face and his interminable discussions of books. Feeling that her impatience might provoke her presently into an act of rudeness which she would afterward regret, she held out her hand while she signalled with the other to the approaching stage.

"Come to-morrow when I shall be at home," she said; and though she remembered that she would probably spend the next afternoon with Kemper, this suggestion of an untruth seemed at the time to make no difference. A moment later as she seated herself in the stage, she drew a long breath as if she had

escaped from an oppressive atmosphere; and the rumbling of the vehicle was a relief to her because it silenced for awhile the noise of the opposing hosts of angels that warred unceasingly within her soul.

When she reached Gerty's house in Sixty-ninth Street, she found not only her friend, whom she wished to see, but Perry Bridewell, whom she had tried particularly to avoid. At first she felt almost angry with Gerty for not receiving her alone; but Gerty, suspecting as much from her chilled look, burst out at once into a comic protest:

"I tried my best to get rid of Perry," she said, "perhaps you may make the attempt with better success."

"I've caught a beastly cold," responded Perry, from the cushioned chair on the hearthrug, where he sat prodding the wood fire with a small brass poker, "it's stuck in my chest, and the doctor tells me if I don't look out I'll be in for bronchitis or pneumonia or something or other of the kind."

That he was genuinely frightened showed clearly by the unusual pallor on his handsome face; and with an appearance of giving emphasis to the danger in which he stood, he held out to Laura, as he spoke, a glass bottle filled with large brown lozenges.

"He remembers his last illness," observed Gerty seriously, "which was an attack of croup at the age of two—and he's afraid they will bandage his chest as they did then."

As he fell back languidly in his easy chair, resting his profile against the pale green cushions, Laura noticed, for the first time, a striking resemblance to Kemper in the full, almost brutal curve of his jaw

and chin. Ridiculous as her annoyance was, she felt that it mounted through her veins and showed in her reddening face.

"Since you are ill I'll not take Gerty away from you to-day," she said, rising hastily.

"Oh, don't think of going on my account," replied Perry, with a pale reflection of his amiable smile, "a little cheerful company is the very thing I need." Then, as a servant entered with a cup of tea and a plate of toast, he sat up, with his invalid air, to receive the tray upon his knees. "I manage to take a little nourishment every hour or two," he explained, as he crumbled his toast into bits.

"I've racked my brain to amuse him," remarked Gerty, while she watched him gravely, "but he can't get his mind off that possible attack of pneumonia, and he's even made me look up the death rate from it in the bulletin of the Board of Health. Do you think Arnold would come if I telephoned him? or shall I send instead for Roger Adams? I have even thought of writing invitations to his entire club list."

"Oh, I'll send Arnold myself," rejoined Laura, "he got back just last night, you know."

"I saw him coming up at five o'clock when I went to the doctor's," returned Gerty; and this innocent chance remark plunged Laura immediately into a melancholy which not only arrested the words upon her lips, but seemed to deaden her whole body even to her hands which held her muff. An intolerable suspicion seized her that they were aware of the return of Madame Alta, that they blamed Arnold for something of which they did not speak, that they

pitied her because she was deluded into an acceptance of the situation. Though her judgment told her that this suspicion was a mere wild fancy, still she could not succeed in driving it from her thoughts, and the more she struggled against it, the stronger was the hold it gained upon her imagination if not upon her reason. In the effort to banish this persistent torment, she began to talk fast and recklessly of other things, until the animation with which she spoke rekindled the old brilliant fervour in her face.

She was still talking with her restless gayety, when Adams came in to ask after Perry, but with his presence a stillness which was almost one of peace, came over her. At the end of a few minutes she rose to leave, and a little later as he walked with her along Sixty-ninth Street in the direction of the Park, she had, for the first time in her life, a vague intuition that the secret of happiness, after all, might lie for her, not in the gratification but in the relinquishment of desire.

"I saw Kemper a while ago," he remarked, as they crossed Fifth Avenue to the opposite sidewalk which ran along the wall under the bared November trees. "He seemed very much interested in some mining scheme which Barclay has gone in for. I never saw him more enthusiastic."

"Was he?" she asked indifferently; and she felt almost a resentment against Kemper because he could pass so easily from the reconciliation with her to the subject of mining. Since the evening before, when she had received the news of his absence with Madame Alta, her attitude to her lover had, unconsciously to herself, undergone a change; and

her critical faculty, so long dominated by her feeling, appeared now to have usurped the place which was formerly held by her ideal image of him. But this awakening of her intellect had no power whatever over her love, which remained unaltered, and the one result of her clearer mental vision was to destroy her happiness, while it did not lessen the strength of her emotion.

She glanced up at Adams as he walked beside her in the pale sunshine, and the smile with which he responded to her look, awoke in her the impulse to confess to him the burden which oppressed her thoughts. Realising that it would be impossible to confide these things to any human being, she changed the subject by asking him a trivial question about Trent's play.

"There's no doubt of his success, I think," he answered, "but just now his mind is absorbed with other things. He's as deep in his love as he ever was in his ambition."

"So he has found her?" enquired Laura, with but little animation. She was glad that Trent was happy at last, but she could not force herself to feel an interest in this love affair which was so unlike her own.

"Well, he didn't have to look far," rejoined Adams, laughing, "he discovered her, I believe, in the same apartment house. Some of us," he concluded a little sadly, "go a good deal farther with considerably less success."

"It does puzzle one," said Laura, thinking of Kemper, "that some people should find what they want lying on their very doorstep, while others must go on looking for it their whole lives through."

He smiled at her with a tenderness which seemed, somehow, a part of his strength. "But yours was the easier fate," he said.

"Is it the easier? I hardly know," she answered, and the note of pain in her voice entered his heart. "I sometimes think that the best of life is to go on wanting till one dies."

"Not the best—not the best," he responded, with a touch of his whimsical humour. "I have had my share of wanting and I speak of what I know. It all comes right in the end, I suppose, but it's a pretty tough experience while it lasts, and, after all, we live in the minute not in eternity."

Her gaze had dropped away from him, but at his words she lifted her eyes again to meet his look.

"I wonder what it was you wanted so," she said—for he impressed her suddenly as possessing a force of will which it would be not only ineffectual, but even foolish to resist. The aggressive bulk of Perry Bridewell, the impetuous egoism of Kemper showed, not as strength, but as violence compared to the power which controlled the man at her side. Where had he found this power? she wondered, and by what miracle had he been able to make it his own?

"If I told you, I dare say it wouldn't enlighten you much," he answered. "Isn't it enough to confess that I've done my share of crying for the moon?"

"And if it had dropped into your hands, you would have found, probably, that it was made only of green cheese," she replied.

For an instant he looked at her with a glance in

which his humour seemed to cover a memory which she could not grasp.

"Oh, well, I'd have risked it!" he retorted almost gayly.

CHAPTER X

The End of the Path

Having decided that Laura was to be married on the nineteenth of December, Mrs. Payne had gathered not only the invitations, but the entire trousseau into the house three weeks before the date upon which she had fixed. Laura, who had at first entered enthusiastically into the question of clothes, had shown during the last fortnight an indifference which was almost an open avoidance of the subject; and the lively old lady was forced to conduct an unsupported campaign against dressmakers and milliners.

"It's fortunate, to put it mildly, my dear, that you have me to attend to such matters," she remarked one day, "or you would most likely have started on your wedding journey a dowd—and there can be no happy marriage," she concluded with caustic philosophy, "which is not founded upon a carefully selected trousseau."

"If his love for me depends on clothes, I don't want it," replied Laura in an indignant voice.

Mrs. Payne shook her false gray curls, until the little wire hairpins which held them in place slipped out and dropped into her lap.

"It might very well depend upon something more difficult to procure," she retorted with reason. Then in a last effort to arouse Laura into the pride of pos-

session, she brought out her multitude of boxes and unfolded her treasures of old lace.

At the time Laura looked on with listless inattention, but two days later she returned in a change of mood which put to blush the worldly materialism of Mrs. Payne.

"Aunt Rosa, you're right," she said, "I haven't paid half enough attention to my clothes. I believe, after all, that clothes are among the most important things in life."

"I regard it as a merciful providence that you have come to your senses in time," observed the old lady, with a sincerity which survived even the extravagance into which her niece immediately plunged—for, after looking carelessly over the contents of the large white boxes, Laura turned away as if disappointed, and demanded in her next breath a sable coat.

"Arnold admired a woman in a sable coat yesterday," she said, with a gravity which impressed Mrs. Payne as almost solemn.

But her reaction into the vanities of the world was as short lived as her former disdain of them; and by the time the sable coat arrived she had almost begun to regret that she had ever asked for it. Since the selection of it she had heard Kemper quite as carelessly express approval of an ermine wrap, and her heart had suddenly sickened over the fruitlessness of her ambition. She was still trying on the coat under Mrs. Payne's eyes, when Gerty, coming in, as she announced, to deliver a message, paused in the centre of the room as if petrified into an attitude of admiration.

"My dear, you're so gorgeous that you look like

nothing short of a tragic actress. Well, you ought to be a happy woman."

"If clothes can make me happy, I suppose I shall be," rejoined Laura. "Aunt Rosa has spared neither her own strength nor Uncle Horace's money."

"That's because I love you better than my ease and Horace loves you better than his foundling hospital," replied Mrs. Payne.

Standing before the long mirror, Laura looked with a frown at the sable coat, which gave her, as Gerty had said, the air of a tragic actress. Her dark hair, with its soft waves about the forehead, her brilliant eyes, and the delicate poetic charm of her figure, borrowed from the costly furs a distinction which Gerty felt to be less that of style than of personality.

"He will like me in this," she thought; and then remembering the ermine wrap, which was becoming also, she wondered if another woman would buy it, if Kemper would see it at the opera, and if he would, perhaps, admire it again as he had done that day.

"If he does I shall regret these though they were so much more costly," she concluded, "and my whole pleasure in them may be destroyed by a chance remark which he will let fall." She understood, all at once, the relentless tyranny which clothes might acquire—the jealousy, the extravagance, the feverish emulation, and the dislike which one woman might feel for another who wore a better gown. "Yet if I give my whole life to it there will always be someone who is richer, who is better dressed and more beautiful than I," she thought. "Though my individuality wins to-day, to-morrow I shall meet a

woman beside whom I shall be utterly extinguished. And there is no escape from this; it is inevitable and must happen." A shiver of disgust went through her, and it seemed to her that she saw her life as plainly as if the glass before her revealed her whole future and not merely her figure in the sable coat. She shrank from her destiny, and yet she knew that in spite of herself, she must still follow it; she longed for her old freedom of spirit, and instead she struggled helplessly in the net which her own temperament cast about her. "Is it possible that I can ever enter into this warfare which I have always despised?" she asked, "into this conflict of self against self, of vanity against vanity? Shall I, like Gerty, grow to fear and to hate other women in my foolish effort to keep alive a passion which I know to be worthless? Shall I even come in the end to feel terror and suspicion in my love for Gerty?" But this last thought was so terrible to her that she lacked the courage with which to face it, and so she put it now resolutely aside as she had learned to put aside at will all the disturbing questions which her conscience asked.

"I know that you are over head and ears in it all," Gerty was saying, "and I shouldn't have dropped in if I hadn't just been called to the telephone by Arnold. He was, of course, rushing off to a meeting about those everlasting mines—Perry's in it, too, and it's really helped his mind to get the better of his lungs at last."

"But I thought Arnold was coming this afternoon," returned Laura, a little hurt.

With a laughing glance at Mrs. Payne, who sat counting silk stockings by the window, Gerty buried

her face in her muff while she shook with unaffected merriment.

"Oh, my dear, what a wife you'll make if you haven't learned to mask your feelings!" she exclaimed, "but as for Arnold, he wants me to bring you to his rooms for tea. The Symonds portrait has come and he'd like us to see it before it's hung. He'll hurry back, he says, the minute that abominable meeting is over—though between you and me he is almost as much interested in those mines as he is in his marriage."

The disappointment in Laura's face was succeeded by an expression of impatient eagerness; and a little later, as she drove with Gerty through the streets, she was able to convince herself that the uncertainty of the last fortnight had yielded finally to the perfect security for which she longed. Sitting there in Gerty's carriage, she felt, with a compassionate heart-throb, that out of her own fulness she could look down and pity the emptiness of her friend's life; and this thought filled her bosom with a sympathy which overflowed in the smile she turned upon the brilliant woman at her side.

"I find myself continually rejoicing because you are to take a house up town," remarked Gerty, as she pressed Laura's hand under the fur robe. "When you come back we'll see each other every day, and when you land, I'll be there to welcome you with the house full of flowers and the dinner ordered."

"There's no use trying to realise it all, I can't," responded Laura; and the interest with which she entered immediately into a discussion of furnishing and housekeeping banished from her mind all recol-

lection of the despondency, the tormenting doubts, of the last few weeks. Yes, all would go well—all must go well in spite of everything she had imagined. Once married she would see this foolish foreboding dissolve in air, and with the wedding ceremony she would enter into that cloudless happiness which she had expected so confidently to find in the Adirondacks. This new hope possessed her instantly to the exclusion of all other ideas, and she clung to it as passionately as she had clung to every illusion of the kind which had presented itself to her imagination.

When they reached his rooms, Kemper had not returned, and while Gerty amused herself by examining every photograph upon his desk and mantel, Laura drew a chair before the portrait, which was a bold, half-length study painted with a daring breadth of handling. The artist was a new French painter, who had leaped into prominence because of a certain extravagance of style which he affected; and his work had taken Kemper's fancy as everything took it either in art or in life which deviated in any marked eccentricity from the ordinary level of culture or of experience.

"There's something queer about it—I don't like it," said Laura, with her first glance. "Why, it makes him look almost brutal—there's a quality in it I'll never grow accustomed to."

Then, as she looked a moment longer at the picture, she saw that the quality in Kemper which the painter had caught and arrested with an excellent technique upon the canvas, was the resemblance to Perry Bridewell which had offended her when she noticed it the other day. It was there, evidently—this

foreign painter had seized upon it as the most subtle characteristic of Kemper's face—and in dwelling upon it in the portrait as he had done, she realised that he had attempted to produce, not so much the likeness of the man, as a startling, almost sinister study of a personality. What he had shown her was the temperament, not the face of her lover—not her lover, indeed, she told herself the next instant, but Madame Alta's.

"I can't get used to it—I'll never like it," she repeated, and rising from her chair, as if the view of the portrait annoyed her, she went over to the centre table to glance idly over the current fiction with which Kemper occupied his leisure hours.

Her eyes were still wandering aimlessly over the titles of the books, when her attention was diverted by the sound of Wilkins' voice, lowered discreetly to an apologetic whisper; and immediately afterward she heard the softened soprano of a woman, who insisted, apparently, upon leaving the elevator and crossing the hall outside. The conversation with Wilkins had reached Gerty's ears at the same instant, and she, too, sat now with her enquiring gaze bent on the door, which opened presently to admit the ample person of Madame Alta. At sight of them she showed no tremor of surprise, but stood poised there, in an impressive stage entrance, upon the threshold, presiding, as it were, over the situation with all the brilliant publicity which her exquisite gift conferred. Her art had not only placed her below the level of her sex's morality, it had lifted her above any embarrassment of accident, and as she hesitated for a single smiling minute in the doorway, she ap-

peared more at home in her surroundings than either of the two women who stood, in silence, awaiting her advance. With her ermine, her ostrich feathers, her smile, and her scented powder, she impressed Laura less as extinguishing her by the splendour of a presence than as smothering her in the softness of an effect. For it was at Laura that, after the first gently enquiring glance, she levelled her words as well as her caressing look.

"It was such a happy chance to meet you that I couldn't let it slip," she said, as she bore down upon her with a large, soft hand outstretched, "Mr. Kemper has been so good a friend to me that I am overjoyed to have the opportunity of telling you how much I think of him. He has been really the greatest help about some speculations, too—don't you think he has quite a genius for that kind of thing?"

For a moment Laura looked at her in a surprise caused less by the other's entrance than by her own inward composure. For weeks she had told herself that she hated Madame Alta in her heart, yet, brought face to face with her, feeling the soft pressure of her hand, she realised that she had hated merely a creature of straw and not this woman whose humanity was, after all, of the same flesh and blood and spirit as her own. By the wonder of her intuition she had recognised in her first glance the thing which Kemper, for all his worldly knowledge, had missed in his more intimate association, and this was that the soul of the woman before her had not perished, but was still tossed wildly in the fires of art, of greed, of sensuality. Between her lover and the prima donna she knew that for this one instant at least, she was

strong enough to stand absolutely detached and incapable of judgment. And in a sudden light, as from a lamp that was turned inward, she saw that if she could but maintain this attitude of pity, she would place her happiness beyond any harm from the attacks of Madame Alta or of her kind. She saw this, yet she felt that the vision was almost useless, for even while she stood there the light went out and she knew that it would not shine for her again.

"I know but little of that side of him," she answered, smiling. "It is pleasant to hear that he has a gift I did not suspect."

"Oh, I dare say he has others," retorted Madame Alta, "but I came about these very speculations to-day," she added, "and since he isn't at home—if you'll let me—I'll leave a note on his desk. I start for Chicago to-night for a month of continuous hard work. Until you know what it is to race about the country for your life," she wound up merrily, "never stop to waste your pity on a day labourer."

With a smiling apology to Gerty, she crossed to Kemper's desk, where she wrote a short note which she proceeded coolly to place in an envelope and seal. As she moistened the flap of the envelope with her lips, she turned to glance at Laura over her ermine stole.

"I hope you'll remember to tell him that my visit was by no means thrown away, since I saw you," she remarked, with her exaggerated sweetness.

"Why not wait and tell him yourself?" suggested Laura, so composedly that she wondered why her heart was beating quickly, "he'll probably be back

in a few minutes for tea, and in that case it wouldn't be necessary for me to deliver so flattering a message."

"Oh, but I want you to—I particularly want you to," insisted the other, creating, as she rose, a lovely commotion by the flutter of her lace veil and her ostrich feathers. "I send him my liveliest congratulations, and the part he'll like best is that I am able to send them by you."

The door closed softly after her, and Gerty, going to the window, threw it open with a bang which served as an outlet to the emotion she lacked either the courage or the opportunity to put into words.

"I don't like her perfume," she observed, with an affected contortion of her nostrils, "there's something to be said for the odour of sanctity, after all."

"Why, I thought it delicious," returned Laura, as if astonished. "It even occurred to me to ask her where she got it."

"Well, I'm thankful you didn't," exclaimed Gerty; and she concluded dismally after a moment, "What hurts me most is to think I've wasted bouquets on her over the footlights, for a more perfectly odious person——"

"I found her wonderfully handsome," remarked Laura, in a voice which had a curious quality of remoteness, as if she spoke from some dream-like state of mental abstraction. "Wonderfully handsome," she insisted, indignant at the scornful denial in Gerty's look.

"Well, it's the kind of handsomeness that makes me want to scratch her in the face," rejoined Gerty, with the unshakable courage of her impressions.

Turning away from her friend, Laura went over to the desk as if drawn in spite of her resolution, by the large sealed envelope lying on the white blotter. The handwriting of the address, with its bold, free flourish at the end, appeared to fascinate her eyes, for after looking at it attentively a moment, she took it up and brought it over to the hearth where Gerty stood.

"Yes, she is wonderfully handsome," she repeated; and her tone was so indifferent that it came with a shock of surprise to Gerty, when she bent over and laid the letter upon the burning logs. Dropping on her knees, she watched the paper catch fire, redden in the flame, turn to ashes, and at last dissolve in smoke. Then she leaned forward and pushed the logs together, as if she wished to destroy some last vestige of the words which were still visible to her eyes.

"Laura!" called Gerty sharply. She had made a step forward, but as Laura rose from her knees and faced her, she fell back into her former attitude.

"If you want to tell him," said Laura coldly, "you may do it when he comes. I shan't mind it in the least."

"Tell him!" cried Gerty, and her voice shook with a tremor she could not control, "but, oh! Laura, what made you do it?"

She knew that she wanted to go away by herself and weep; but she could not tell at the moment whether it was for Laura or for her own disappointment that she was more concerned. Her whole outlook on life was altered by the thing which Laura had done; she felt that she no longer believed in any-

body and that it was impossible for her to go on living as she had lived until to-day.

"I don't know," replied Laura, with a curiosity so vague that it sounded almost impersonal, "I don't know why I did it." As she uttered the words the question seemed to absorb her thoughts; then, before Gerty caught the sound of Kemper's approaching footsteps, she knew that he must be coming by the abruptness of the change with which Laura spoke.

"I wonder why it is that men never appreciate the necessity for tea!" she exclaimed, and laughing she went quickly toward the door. "I don't believe you'd have cared if you'd found us starving on your threshold," she wound up with reproachful gayety.

"Oh, I hoped you'd ordered it," said Kemper, "upon my word I'm sorry—I fear you must have had a stupid wait."

He entered with his breathless, though smiling, apology, touched the bell for Wilkins as he crossed the room, and offered his hand first to Gerty and then to Laura with an equally enthusiastic pressure. The clear red was still in his face, and his eyes beamed with animation as he stood warming himself before the fire.

"Have you been here long?" he asked, looking at his watch with a slight frown. "By Jove, I'm a good half hour after time. What did you do with yourselves while you cursed me?"

"First we looked at the portrait—which I hate—then we read the names of all your silly books," responded Laura, with a dissimulation so natural that Gerty was divided between regret for her sincerity and admiration for her acting.

"Well, it doesn't do to quarrel not only with our bread and meat, but with our automobiles, too," protested Kemper lightly, "It's a good thing I've gone in for, and it all came of my riding up in the train with Barclay to the Adirondacks—otherwise he'd have been too sharp to have put me on to the tip." Then his rapid glance travelled to the portrait leaning against a chair, and he put a question with the same eager interest he had shown in the subject of mining. "So you've had time to come to judgment on the French fellow. What do you think of him?"

"It's not you—I won't believe it," replied Laura merrily, "if he's right, then I've been deluded into marrying the wrong man."

"Oh, he goes in for style, of course," remarked Kemper, closing one eye as he fell back and examined the picture, "most of the French people do, you know."

The radiance which belonged to an inner illumination rather than to any outward flush of colour, had suffused Laura's face, until she seemed to glow with an animation which revealed itself not only in her look and voice, but in her whole delicate figure, so fragile, yet so full of energy. There was something unnatural, almost feverish in the brightness of her eyes and in the rapid gestures of her small expressive hands. To Gerty she appeared to resemble a beautiful wild bird, helplessly beating its wings in the fowler's net.

"But isn't their style mostly affectation as their strength is only coarseness?" she asked eagerly, wondering as she spoke, what her words meant and why she should have chosen these out of the whole

English language. "Isn't it truth, after all," she added, with the same excited emphasis, "that we need in life?" It occurred to her suddenly that she was repeating words which someone else had said before her, and she tried to remember what the occasion was and who had uttered them.

Then as she looked at Kemper, she found herself wondering if they would be obliged, in order to make life bearable, to lie to each other every day they lived? The letter which she had destroyed was her half of this lie, she saw, and it seemed to her that Kemper's share was in his old love for Jennie Alta. But, to her surprise, when she thought of this it aroused no torment, hardly any disturbance in her heart, for Kemper and his love for her appeared to her now in an entirely new and different aspect, and she realised that because of the lie between them, even the emotion he aroused in her had turned worthless in her eyes.

PART IV

RECONCILIATION

CHAPTER I

The Secret Chambers

Waking in the night, with a start, Laura asked herself why she had burned the letter. As she lay there in the darkness it seemed to her that the sudden light shone in her thoughts again, and she saw everything made clear to her as she had seen it while she held Jennie Alta's hand. In that instant she had looked beyond the small personal emotions to the woman's soul with its burden of greed and sensuality, and because she had been able to do this, she had felt herself to be composed and released from hatred. To discern the soul was to feel not only tolerance, but pity for the flesh, and it appeared to her now that in that one moment she had ceased to be herself alone, and had shared in the divine wisdom which the sudden light had revealed to her in her breast. Yet the instant afterward her personality had triumphed and she had burned the letter!

The illumination within her faded now, and as she lay there with wide open eyes, she saw only the surrounding darkness. Her own motives were still vague to her; when she tried to remember the prompting of her thoughts she could recall only a physical pain which had entered her bosom while she looked at the large white envelope upon the blotter. "Before this I had never lied in my life," she said, "I had

never been capable of the slightest dishonest act, I had even taken a pride in my truth like the pride some women take in beauty—and yet I did this thing without effort and I do not know now why I did, nor what I thought of at the time, nor whether I regretted it the moment afterward."

With a resolution which had seldom failed her, she attempted to banish the recollection from her mind; and turning her face from the pale darkness of the window, she closed her eyes again and lay breathing quietly. "Why should I worry—it will all come right—everything will come right if I have patience," she thought, trying to persuade herself to sleep.

But she had no sooner shut her eyes than she began to live over again the afternoon in Kemper's room; and her heart beat so high that she heard the muffled sound under the coverlet "Why did Gerty look at me so?" she asked. "Did she really look at me as if she were afraid, or was it only my imagination?" From Gerty her excited thoughts flew back to Kemper and it seemed to her that she had read scorn and suspicion in the beaming glance he had thrown upon her—in the breathless apology of his entrance. "Had he met her downstairs? Did he know all the time? and was he only waiting for Gerty's absence to accuse me face to face of my dishonesty? But it was a very little thing," she argued aloud, as if justifying herself to a presence beside her bed, "it was such a little thing that it had almost escaped my memory." Then, as she uttered the words, she realised that the justification she attempted was for her own soul rather than for her lover; and she saw that whether Kemper suspected or not made no

vital difference to her so long as the dishonesty was there. "The unspoken lie is still between us and his knowledge of it can neither take it away nor undo the fact that it has been. And if I burned the letter might I not be guilty of even greater things under the same impulse? Since I trust neither him nor myself what is there but misery in any future that we may share? Shall I give him up even now? Can I give him up?" But as she demanded this of herself there returned to her the look in his eyes at certain animated instants, and she felt that the charm of his look, which meant nothing, was stronger to hold her than a multitude of reasons. "If I could forget this look in his face, I might forget him," she thought, "but though I struggle to forget it I cannot any more than I can forget the letter lying on his desk."

Again she closed her eyes in a fresh effort to shut out consciousness; but when she determined to sleep the darkness seemed to grow suddenly alive about her, and starting up in a spasm of terror, she lighted the candle on the table beside her bed.

"In the morning I shall tell him," she exclaimed aloud, "I shall tell him everything and if he looks at me with anger I shall go away and not see him any more." At the time it appeared to her very easy, and she felt that it made no difference to her however things might happen on the morrow. "It will be as it will be, and I cannot alter it, for in any event I shall be miserable whether I marry him or give him up." Then she remembered that though she had pardoned Kemper greater sins than this, by the courage of his attitude he had always succeeded in

placing her hopelessly in the wrong. "Even after his meeting with Madame Alta it was he who forgave me," she thought with the strange mental clearness, which destroyed her happiness without lessening her emotion, "and through his whole life, however deeply he may wrong me, I know that I shall always be the one to justify myself and seek forgiveness. Is it, after all, only necessary to have the courage of one's acts that one may do anything and not be punished?"

The light of the candle flickering on the mirror gave back her own face to her as if reflected in the dim surface of a pool. She watched the shadows from a vase of autumn leaves come and go across it, until it seemed to her that the rippling reflection resembled a drowned face that was still her own; and shrinking back in horror, she sat holding the candle in her hand, so that the light would shine on the walls and floor.

"Yes, that is settled—I shall tell him to-morrow," she said, as if surrendering her future into the power of chance or God or whatever stood outside herself, "it will happen as it must, I cannot change it." For a moment there was some comfort in the fatalism of this thought, and after blowing out the candle, she turned her face to the wall and fell at last into a troubled sleep. But her sleep even was filled with perplexing questions, which she continued to ask herself with the same piercing mental clearness that tormented her when she was awake; and she passed presently into a vivid dream, in which she rescued the letter with burned hands, from the fire, and carried it to Kemper, who laughed and kissed her burns and threw the letter back into the flames. "It has never

really happened—you have imagined it all," he said, "you've dreamed Jennie Alta and now you're dreaming me and yourself also. Look up, for you are just beginning to awake." And when she looked up at his words, his face changed suddenly and she saw that it was Roger Adams who held her hands.

From this dream she awoke with a more distinct memory of Adams than she had had for many days; and she felt again the impulse to unburden her heart to him, which she had resisted on the afternoon they walked together down Fifth Avenue. The dawn had begun to break, and while she waited impatiently for the growing light, she resolved with one of those promptings of wisdom, in which ordinary reason appeared to have no part, that when the morning came she would go to Adams' office before seeing Kemper. Then she remembered the distance which had sprung between them in the last few months, and it seemed to her to have grown still more impassable since the evening before. But because the visit offered an excuse to postpone her confession to Kemper until the afternoon, she caught at it with an eagerness, which hurried her into her hat and coat as soon as her pretence of breakfasting with Angela was at an end.

The morning was bright and clear, and as she walked through the early sunshine in the street, she remembered the day, so long ago now, when she had met Adams going to his office at this hour, and she recalled, with a smile, that she had pitied him then because of the worn places on his overcoat. She no longer pitied him now—Gerty, herself, Perry Bridewell, even Kemper, she felt, might be deserving of compassion, but not Adams. Yes, she, herself, in spite of her

boasted strength had come at last to feel the need of being loved for the very weakness she had once despised. But she knew that, though Adams might understand and forgive this weakness, in Kemper it would provoke only the scorn which she had begun to fear and dread. Yet her intellect rather than her heart told her that Adams was a stronger man than Kemper and that his wider sympathies proved only that he was, also, the larger of the two. Was the difference between them merely one of goodness, after all, her intellect, not her heart, demanded, and was it true that the perfect love could not enter except where this goodness had been to blaze the way before it in the soul?

As she walked through the streets fanciful comparisons between the two men thronged in her brain, but when presently she reached Adams' office, and stood beside his desk, with her hand in his hearty grasp, she realised all at once that the visit was useless, and that there was nothing she could say to him which would not sound hysterical and absurd.

"So, thank heaven, there's something I can do for you!" he exclaimed, with his cordial smile. "Wait till I get into my overcoat and then we'll see about it."

"No—no," she protested in a terror, which she could not explain even to herself, "don't come out with me—there's nothing you can do. I came because I couldn't help myself," she added, smiling; "and I'll go for no better reason, in a little while."

"Well, I'm ready whenever you say so. If it's to overturn Brooklyn Bridge, I'll set about it for the asking."

"It isn't anything so serious—there's nothing really I want done," she answered gayly, though the pain in her eyes stabbed him to the heart, "all I wanted was to make sure of you—to make sure, I mean, that you are really here."

"Oh, I'm here all right!" he replied, with energy.

She looked at him steadily for a moment with her excited eyes which had grown darkly brilliant.

"Do you know what I sometimes think?" she said, breaking into a pathetic little laugh, "it is that I remind myself of one of those angels who, after falling out of heaven, could neither get back again nor reconcile themselves to the things of earth."

Her hand lay on his desk, and while she spoke he bent forward and touched it an instant with his own. Light as the gesture was, it possessed a peculiar power of sympathy; and she was conscious as he looked at her that there was no further need for her to speak, because he understood, not only all that she had meant to put into words, but everything that was hidden in her heart as well.

"I can't preach to you, Laura," he said, "but—but—oh, I can't express even what is in my mind," he added. "I wish I could!"

"It wouldn't help me," she replied, "because although I am not reconciled with the things of earth I want to be—oh, how I want to be!"

"But you can't be—not you," he said. "You're of that particular fibre which grows stronger through pain, I think—and, in the end, how much easier it is to be made all spirit or all clay—it's the combination, not the pure quantity that hurts."

"I wonder if you ever know what it is?" she

rejoined. "Does the earth ever pull you back when you want to climb?"

His smile faded, and he looked at her again with the sympathy which accepted, without explanation, not only her outward aspect, but the soul within. "There's not much in my life that counts for a great deal, Laura," he said, "but you come in for considerably the larger share of it. At this moment I am ready to do either of two things, as you may wish—I am ready to stand aside and let your future settle itself as it probably will, or I am ready, at your word, to hear everything and to judge for you as I would judge for myself. No—no, don't answer me now," he added, "carry it away with you, and remember or forget it, as you choose."

Though there were tears in her eyes as she looked at him, she turned away, after an instant, with a flippant laugh.

"Why, it all sounds as if I were really unhappy!" she exclaimed, " but you won't believe that, will you?"

"I'll gladly believe otherwise when you prove it."

"But haven't I proved it? Don't I prove it every day I live?"

"You prove to me at this minute that you are particularly wretched," he returned.

"I am not—I am not," she retorted angrily, while a frown drew her dark brows together. "You have no right to think such things of me—they are not true."

"I have a right to think anything that occurs to me," he corrected quietly, "though I am willing to beg your pardon for putting it into words. Well,

since you assure me that you are entirely happy, I can only say that I am overjoyed to hear it."

"I am happy," she insisted passionately; and a little later when she was alone in the street, she told herself that a lie had become more familiar to her than the truth. The conversation with Adams appeared a mistake when she looked back upon it—for instead of lessening it seemed only to increase the weight of her troubles—so she determined presently to think no more either of Adams or of the reasons which had prompted her impulsive visit to him. To forget oneself! Yes, Gerty was right in the end, and the object of all society, all occupations, all amusements, showed to her now as so many unsuccessful attempts to escape the haunting particular curse of personality. Gerty escaped it by her frivolous pursuits and her interminable flirtations, which meant nothing; Kemper escaped it by living purely in the objective world of sense; Adams escaped it—— The name checked her abruptly, and she stopped in her thoughts as if a light had flashed suddenly before her eyes. Here, at last, was the explanation of happiness, she felt, and yet she felt also, that it presented itself to her mind in an enigma which she could not solve—for Adams, she recognised, had mastered, not escaped, his personality. The poison of bitterness was gone, but the effectiveness of power was still as great; and his temperament, in passing through the fiery waters of experience, was mellowed into a charm which seemed less a fortunate grace of aspect than the result of a peculiar quality of vision. Was it his own life that had opened his eyes until he could look into the secret chambers in the lives of others?

In Gramercy Park she found Mrs. Payne waiting for her with the carriage, and she accepted almost eagerly the old lady's invitation to spend the morning in a search for hats. At the moment it seemed to her that hats offered as promising an aid to forgetfulness as any other, and she threw herself immediately into the pursuit of them with an excitement which enabled her, for the time, at least, to extinguish the fierce hunger of her soul in supplying the more visible exactions of her body.

At luncheon Gerty appeared, wearing a startling French gown, which, she said, had just arrived that morning. After the first casual greeting they fell into an animated discussion of the choice of veils, during which Gerty declared that Laura had never selected the particular spots which would be most becoming to her features. "You get them too large and too far apart," she insisted, picking up a black net veil from a pile on Laura's table, "even I with my silly nose can't stand this kind."

Laura's eyes were fixed upon her with their singular intensity of look, but in spite of the absorption of her gaze, she had not heard a single word that Gerty uttered.

"Yes, yes, you're right," she said; but instead of thinking of the veils, she was wondering all the time if Gerty had really forgotten her jealousy of Madame Alta and the letter she had burned.

"I shall tell him this afternoon and that will make everything easy," she thought; and when, after a little frivolous conversation Gerty had remembered an engagement and driven hurriedly away, the situation appeared to Laura to have become perfectly

smooth again. At the announcement of Kemper's name, she crossed the room to meet him with this impulse still struggling for expression. "I shall tell him now, and then everything will be made easy," she repeated.

But when she opened her lips to speak, she found that the confession would not come into words, and what she really said was:

"It has been a century since yesterday, for I've done nothing but shop."

Laughing he caught her hands, and she saw with her first glance, that he was in one of his ironic moods.

"I thought I'd netted a wren," he answered, "but it seems I've caught a bird of Paradise."

"Then it was your ignorance of natural history, and not I, that deceived you," she retorted gayly, "because I didn't spread my wings for you, did you imagine that they were not brilliant?"

There was a note almost of relief in her voice as she spoke—for she knew now that, so long as he refused to be serious, she could not tell him until to-morrow.

CHAPTER II

In Which Laura Enters the Valley of Humiliation

Two weeks later Laura was still able to assure herself that it was this lack of "seriousness" in Kemper's manner which had kept her from alluding to the burned letter. Since the morning on which she had seen Adams, she felt that she had merely skimmed experience without actually touching it; and three days from the date of her marriage she was as far from any deeper understanding of the situation as she had been in the beginning of her love. In the end it was so much easier to ignore her difficulties than to face them; and it seemed to her now that she was forced almost in spite of herself into Gerty's frivolous attitude toward life. To evade the real—to crowd one's existence with little lies until there was no space left through which the larger truth might enter—this was the only solution which she had found ready for her immediate need.

Adams she had not met again; once he had called, but impelled by a shrinking which was almost one of fear, she had turned back on the threshold and refused to see him. Even Gerty she had tried to avoid since the afternoon in Kemper's rooms, but Gerty, who was in her gayest mood, drove down every day "to overturn," as she carelessly remarked, "the newest presents."

"I'm heartily glad you're going to Europe," she said, "and I hope by the time you come back you'll have lost that nervous look in your face. It never used to be there and I don't like it."

At her words Laura threw an alarmed glance at the mirror; then she turned her head with a laugh in which there was a note of bitterness.

"It came there in my effort to make conversation," she answered. "I've been engaged to Arnold eight months and we've talked out every subject that we have in common. Do you know what it is to be in love with a man and yet to rack your brain for something to say to him?" she finished merrily.

"That's because you ought to have married Roger Adams, as I was the only one to suggest," retorted Gerty, "then you'd have had conversation enough to flow on, without a pause, till Judgment Day. It's a very good thing, too," she added seriously, "because the real bug-a-boo of marriage is boredom, you know."

"But how can two people bore each other when they are in love?" demanded Laura, almost indignant.

The possibility appeared to her at the moment as little short of ridiculous, yet she knew, in her heart of hearts, that she faced, not without approaching dread, the thought of those two months in Europe; and she admitted now for the first time that beyond the absorption of their love, she and Kemper had hardly an interest which they shared. Even the eyes with which they looked on Europe would be divided by the space of that whole inner world which stretched between them. Yet because of the su-

premacy of this one sentiment she had striven to crush out her brain in order that she might have the larger heart with which to nourish the emotion which held them together. In the pauses of this sentiment she realised that their thoughts sprang as far asunder as the poles, and as she looked from Gerty to the wedding presents scattered in satin boxes on chairs and tables, the fact that the step she took was irrevocable, that in three days she would be Kemper's wife, that there was no possible escape from it now, produced a sudden sickening terror in her heart. Then with a desperate clutch at her old fatalistic comfort, she told herself that it would all come right if she were only patient—that with her marriage everything would be settled and become entirely simple.

Gerty was unpacking a case from a silversmith's when Kemper came in; and he gave a low whistle of dismay as he glanced about the room strewn with boxes.

"By Jove, I believe they think we're going to set up a business!" he exclaimed.

"Oh, you can't imagine how all this comes in for entertaining," replied Gerty, shaking out her skirt as she rose from her knees.

Laura's eyes were on Kemper's face, and she saw that it wore a look of annoyance beneath the conventional smile with which he responded to Gerty's words. Something had evidently happened to displease him, and she waited a little anxiously half hoping for, half dreading her friend's departure.

"I trust you'll go through the ceremony more gracefully than Perry did," Gerty was saying with a

teasing merriment, while she broke a white rosebud from the vase of flowers and fastened it in his coat. "I declare he quite spoiled the whole effect, he looked so frightened. I never realised how little sense of humour Perry has until I saw him at the altar."

"Well, it isn't exactly a joke, you know," retorted Kemper.

For the first time, as Laura watched him, she remembered that he had been through it all before without her; and the thought entered her heart like a dagger, that even now there was another woman alive somewhere in the world who had been his wife—who had been almost as much loved, almost as close to him as she herself was to-day. The thought sickened her, and she felt again her blind terror of a step so irrevocable.

Gerty had gone at last; and Kemper, after walking twice up and down the room, stopped to examine a silver coffee service with an attention which was so evidently assumed that Laura was convinced he might as well have fixed his gaze upon the fireplace. His thoughts were busily occupied in quite an opposite direction from his eyes, for turning presently, he laid down the sugar bowl he had picked up, and went rapidly to the mantel piece, where he took down a photograph of Roger Adams.

"You don't see much of Adams now?" he remarked enquiringly.

"Not much," she went over to the mantel and glanced carelessly at the picture in his hand. "I never shall again."

"How's that? and why?"

"Oh, I don't know—one never sees much of one's

friends after marriage, somehow. To supply the world to me," she added gayly, "is a part of the responsibility of your position."

Though his gaze was fixed intently upon her face, she saw clearly that he had hardly taken in her words, for while she spoke his hands wandered to the inside pocket of his coat, as if he wished to make sure of a letter he had placed there.

"By the way, Laura, a queer thing happened to-day," he said, frowning.

She looked up a little startled.

"A queer thing?"

"I had a letter from Madame Alta asking why I hadn't sold some stock I'd been holding for her? She lost a good deal by my not selling and she was in a devilish temper about it."

Laura had not lowered her eyes, and as he finished she smiled into his face.

"And you did not sell?" she asked.

"I never got the letter—but the odd part is she says she came to see me about it the day you were there with Gerty—that she saw you and that she left the letter with you to deliver——"

He broke off and stood waiting with a half angry, half baffled look; and then as she was still silent he picked up a red leather box from the table, laid it down again and came nearer to where she stood.

"Is it all a lie, Laura?" he demanded.

The justification which she had attempted alone in the night came back to her while she stood there with her hands, which felt like dead things, hanging limp at her sides. "It was so very little that it escaped my memory," was what she had said to herself in

the darkness; but now, face to face with him in the light of day, she could not bring her mind to think these words nor her lips to utter them.

"No, it isn't a lie—it is true," she answered.

"It is true?" he repeated in an astonishment which gave place to anger as he went on. "Do you mean you really met her in my rooms?"

"I met her there—I met her there!" she rejoined in a bitter triumph of truth which seemed, somehow, a relief to her.

"And you did not tell me?"

She shook her head. "I'd never have told you."

"But the letter? What became of the letter?"

She had drawn a step away from him, not in any fresh spirit of evasion, but that she might gain a better view of the look with which he confronted her. Her eyes had not wavered from his since the first question he had asked, but her hands were nervously knotting and unknotting a silver cord which she had picked up from a jeweller's box upon the table at her side.

"Why didn't I get the letter, Laura?" he asked again.

"Because I burned it," she answered slowly, "I burned it in the fire in your room just before you came in—I burned it," she repeated for the third time, raising her voice to clearer distinctness.

A dark flush rose to his face and the sombre colour gave him an almost brutal look.

"In God's name why did you do it?" he asked; and she saw the contempt in his eyes as she had seen it before in her imagination. "I am to presume, I suppose, that you were prompted by jealousy?" he added. "An amiable beginning for a marriage."

"I don't know why I did it," she replied, in a voice which was so constrained as to sound unfeeling. "I didn't know at the time and I don't know now. Yes, I suppose jealousy is as good a reason as any other."

"And is this what I am to expect in the future?" he enquired, with an irony which he might as well have flung at a figure of wood. "Good God!" he exclaimed as his righteous resentment swept from his mind all recollection of his own relapses. "Are you willing to marry a man whom you can't trust out of your sight?"

The force with which he uttered the words drove them so deeply into his consciousness that he was convinced by his own violence of the justice in the stand he took. "Have you absolutely no faith in me?" he demanded.

For a moment the question occupied her thoughts.

"No, I don't think I have any now," she answered, "I've tried to make myself believe I had—I've told a lie to my conscience about it every day I lived—but I don't think I've ever really had faith in you since that night——"

"And yet you are willing to marry me?" he asked, and the scorn in his voice stung her like a physical blow. He looked at her with an angry glance, and while his eyes rested upon her, she understood that he had never really seen her in his life—that he had never penetrated beyond the outward aspect, the trick of gesture.

"No!—No!" she cried out suddenly, as if she had awakened in terror from her sleep. At the instant she saw herself through his eyes, humiliated, beaten

down, unwomanly, and she was possessed by a horror of her own individuality which she felt in some way to be a part of her horror of the man who had revealed it to her.

In his perplexity he had fallen back a step and stood now pulling nervously at his moustache with a gesture which recalled his resemblance to Perry Bridewell. This gesture, more than any words he spoke, shocked her into an acuteness of perception which was almost unnatural in its vividness. It was as if her soul, so long drugged to insensibility, had started up in the last battle for liberation.

"No—no—it is impossible!" she repeated.

"Aren't you rather late in coming to this decision?" he enquired with a short laugh.

But his irony was wasted upon her, for she saw only the look in his eyes, which revealed her deception to her in a blaze of scorn—and she felt that she hated him and herself with an almost equal hatred.

"I am sorry, but—but I can't," she stammered. Feeling her words to be ineffectual she cast about wildly for some reason, some explanation however trivial—and in the effort she found her eyes wandering aimlessly about the room, taking in the scattered wedding presents, his dejected yet angry look, and the fading white rosebud Gerty had pinned jauntily in his coat. Then at last she realised that there was nothing further that she could say, so she stood helplessly knotting the silver cord while she watched the furious perplexity in which he tugged at his moustache.

"I can't for the life of me see why you should be so damned jealous, Laura," he burst out presently,

thrust back from the surface conventions into a brute impulse of rage.

"I told you I didn't know," she answered irritably, "I told you that——"

"Of course, I'm willing to let it go this time," he went on, with what she felt to be a complacent return to his lordly attitude, "there's no use making a fuss, so we may as well forget it—but, for heaven's sake, don't give me a jealous wife. There's nothing under heaven more likely to drive a man insane."

Some elusive grace in her attitude—a suggestion of a wild thing poised for flight—arrested him suddenly as he looked at her; and she saw his face change instantly while the fire of passion leaped to his eyes.

"Be a darling and we'll forget it all!" he exclaimed.

He made a step forward, but shrinking back until she appeared almost to crouch against the wall, she put out her hands as if warding off his approach.

"Don't touch me!" she said; and though she spoke in a whisper, her words seemed to shriek back at her from the air. The thought that she was fighting for the freedom of her soul rushed through her brain, and at the instant, had he laid his hand upon her, she knew that she would have thrown herself from the window.

"I don't want to touch you," he returned, cooling immediately, "but can't you come to your senses and be reasonable?"

"If you don't mind I wish you'd go," she said, looking at him with a smile which was like the smile of a statue.

"If I go now will you promise to get sensible again?" he asked, with annoyance, for it occurred to him that

since he had made up his mind to be magnanimous, she had repulsed his generosity in a most ungrateful fashion.

"I am sensible," she responded, "I am sensible for the first time for months."

"Well, you've a pretty way of showing it," he retorted. His irritation got suddenly the better of him, and fearing that it might break out in spite of his control, he turned toward the door. "For God's sake, let's make the best of it now," he added desperately.

In his nervousness he stumbled against the table and upset the red leather box which contained the coffee service.

"I beg your pardon," he said, and stooping to pick it up, he replaced the silver in the case before he went into the hall and closed the door behind him.

CHAPTER III

Proves a Great City to Be a Great Solitude

After he had gone Laura remained standing where he had left her, until the sound of the hall door closing sharply caused her to draw a breath of relief as if there had come a temporary lifting of the torture she endured. Then, with her first movement, as she looked about the room in the effort to bring order into the confusion of her thoughts, her eyes encountered the array of wedding presents, and the expression of her face changed back into the panic terror in which she had couched against the wall before Kemper's approach. She still saw herself revealed in the light of the scorn which had blazed in his eyes; and the one idea which possessed her now was to escape beyond the place where that look might again reach her. An instinct for flight like that of a wild thing in a jungle shook through her until she stood in a quiver from head to foot; and though she knew neither where she was going, nor of what use this flight would be to her, she went into her bedroom and began to dress herself hastily in her walking clothes. As she tied on her veil and took up her little black bag from the drawer she heard her own voice, which sounded to her ears like the voice of a stranger, repeating the words she had said to Kemper a little earlier: "No—no—I can't. It is impossible." And

she said over these words many times because they infused into her heart the courage of despair which she needed to impel her to the step before her. When the door closed after her and she went down into the street, she was still speaking them half aloud to herself: "No—no—it is impossible."

The dusk had already settled; ahead of her the lights of the city shone blurred through the greyness, while above the housetops Auriga was driving higher in the east. With the first touch of fresh air in her face, she felt herself inspired by an energy which seemed a part of the wind that blew about her; and as she walked rapidly through streets which she did not notice toward an end of which she was still ignorant, her thoughts breaking from the restraint which held them, rushed in an excited tumult through her brain.

"Why did he look at me so?" she asked, "for it is this look which has driven me away—which has made me hate both him and myself." She tried to recall the other expression which she had loved in his face, but instead there returned to her only the angry look with which he had responded to her confession.

As she thought of it now it appeared to her that death was the only means by which she could free herself and him from this marriage; and the several ways of dying which were possible to her crowded upon her with the force of an outside pressure. She might be crushed in the street? or walk on till she found the river? But the different approaches to death showed to her as so hideous that she knew she could not summon the courage with

which to select a particular one and follow it to the end. "Yet I shall never go back," she thought, "he does not love me—he wishes only to spare himself the scandal. If he loved me he could never have looked at me like that. And I loved him three weeks ago," she added. Her love was gone now, and the memory of it had become intolerable to her, yet the vacancy where it had been was so great that death occurred to her again as the only outcome. "Though I hate him it seems impossible that I should live on without him," she said.

But the next instant when she endeavored to recall his face she could remember him only by his casual likeness to Perry Bridewell, and she saw him standing upon the hearthrug while he pulled in angry perplexity at his moustache. The words he had spoken, the tones of his voice, and her own emotion, were blotted from her recollection as if a thick darkness had wiped them out, and from the hour of her deepest anguish she could bring back only a meaningless gesture and the white rosebud he had worn in his coat. What she had suffered then was the dying agony of the thing within her which was really herself, and there remained to her now only the vacant image from which the passion and the life had flown. "How could it make so much difference when I can barely remember it?" she asked; and it seemed to her at the instant that nothing that could happen in one's existence really mattered, since big and little were all equal, and the memory of an emotion faded sooner than the memory of a gesture.

Pausing for a moment on the corner, she watched curiously the faces moving under the electric lights,

and she found herself wondering presently if each man or woman in the crowd was loving and hating or seeking an escape from both love and hatred? A stout man wearing a red necktie, a pretty woman in a purple coat, a pale girl carrying a heavy bundle, a bent shouldered clerk who walked with a satisfied and affected air—as each one passed she saw his features and even his hidden thoughts in a grotesque clearness which seemed to come partly from an illumination within herself and partly from the glare of the lights without. "The man in the red necktie is happy because he has made money; the pretty woman is happy because she is loved—but the pale girl and the bent shouldered clerk are wretched. They have neither love nor money, and they have not found out how little either is worth."

For a while she watched them, almost forgetting her own unhappiness in the excitement of their discovered histories; but wearying suddenly, she turned away and entered a street where the darkness had already gathered. Here she came close upon a pair of lovers who walked arm in arm, but the sight irritated her so she turned again at the next corner. The question whether she should go home or not thrust itself upon her, and it seemed to her that it would be better to die in the street than to return to the persuasions of Gerty, the reproaches of Mrs. Payne, and the complacency of Kemper. As she hurried on in the darkness she saw her past as distinctly as if her eyes were turned backward, and in this vision of it there showed to her the steep upward way of the spirit, and she remembered the day when her destiny had seemed to lie mapped out for her in

the hand of God. "Was this what God meant?" she demanded, and because there was no answer to the question she asked it again and again the more passionately. "Or perhaps there is no God after all," she added.

A sob broke from her lips, and a policeman, who was passing, threw first an enquiring, then a respectful glance at her, and went on again. A child playing in the street ran up to beg for some money, and she opened her bag and gave him a piece of silver with a smile.

"Thank you, lady," he responded, and ran back into the shadows. As he crossed the street she followed him with her eyes, seeing him hasten, his palm outstretched, to an Italian who was roasting chestnuts in a charcoal burner on the opposite sidewalk.

The darkness had grown heavier and as she walked rapidly through streets which she did not know, her nervous energy failed her, and she began to tremble presently from exhaustion. Again she asked herself for the last time if it were possible for her to go home and face Mrs. Payne and Gerty and marry Kemper in three days. A fantastic humour in the situation brought a laugh to her lips—for whenever she was confronted by the hopelessness of her escape, the arguments for her marriage presented themselves to her in the forms of cases of silver and of her wedding dress in its white satin box. Mrs. Payne had spent the afternoon, she knew, in arranging this silver on covered tables in an empty room, and she could see plainly the old lady's animated movements, the careful eye with which she

estimated the value of each gift, and the expression of approval or contempt with which she grouped it according to its importance. Then she thought of Kemper held to his love by the embarrassment of these presents, by the hopelessness of returning them, and by his conventional horror of "getting into print," and at the picture the laugh grew almost hysterical on her lips. How sordid it all was! This array of silver, Mrs. Payne's reproachful comic mask, and Kemper, pulling his moustache as he stood upon the hearthrug, all whirled confusedly in the dimly lighted street before her. She felt her knees tremble, and while this weakness lasted it seemed to her that it would be better to go back and get warm again, and submit to anything they forced upon her. Her flesh, in its weakness, would have yielded, but something more powerful than the flesh—the soul within which she had so long rejected—struggled on after the impulses of the body had surrendered.

The lights grew suddenly blurred before her eyes, and looking up, she found that she had reached a ferry, and that a crowd from a neighbouring factory was hurrying through the open doors into the boat which was about to put off. For the first time it occurred to her that she might leave the city; and going inside she bought a ticket and followed the people who were rushing across the gangway. Where it would take her she had no idea, but when after a few minutes the boat had crossed to the other side, she went out again with the crowd, and then turning in the direction where there appeared to be open country, she walked on more rapidly as if her thoughts flew straight ahead into the broader spaces of the horizon.

At first there were rows of streets, a few scattered shops in among the houses, and groups of workmen from the factories lounging upon the sidewalk. A child, with a crooked back, in a red dress, ran across the pavement in front of her and stopped with an exclamation before a window which contained a display of pink and white candy. Then a second child joined her, and the two fell to discussing the various highly coloured sweets arrayed on little fancy squares of paper behind the glass. As Laura watched them, pausing breathlessly in her walk, every trivial detail of this incident seemed to her to possess an equal importance with all other happenings large or small: for the events of her individual experience had so distorted her perceptions of the ascending values of life, that her own luckless pursuit of happiness appeared of no greater importance in her eyes than the child, with the crooked back, making her choice of sweets. Her own emotions, indeed, interested her no longer, but she was aware of a dull curiosity concerning the crippled child. Would her whole life become misshapen because of the physical form which she wore like an outer garment? And she felt, at the thought, that she would like to stand upon the side of the child and upon the side of all who were oppressed and made miserable by the crookedness either of the body or of destiny.

While this pity was still in her mind she tried to recall Kemper as she had first known him, but it was to remember only that he had reddened with anger as he spoke to her, and that the sunlight, falling upon him, had revealed the gray hair on his temples. The physical aspect which had meant so little in her love

was all that the recollection of him could suggest to her now, for she found that the visual memory still remained after the passion which had informed it with life and colour was blotted out.

The child interested her no longer, and walking on again, she passed, after a time, the scattered houses, and came out upon the open road which showed white and deserted beneath the stars. Looking overhead, as she went on, her gaze swept the heavens with that sense of absolute stillness which comes under the solitude of the sky, and standing presently in the dust of the road, she fixed her eyes upon the Pleiades shining softly far above the jagged line of the horizon. Her feet ached beneath her, but her head seemed suddenly spinning through clear spaces among the stars, and while she stood there, she felt that the distance between her and the sky existed only in the hindrance of her body. With that laid aside might she not recover her soul and God there as well as here?

Again she went on, but this time she found that her limbs could make no further effort, and struggling step by step, to a bend in the road, she looked about her in a physical agony which left her consciousness only of her desire for rest. A house, set back from the roadside in a clump of trees, showed to her as she turned, and going through the little whitewashed gate and up the path, she knocked at the door and then stood trembling before the threshold.

CHAPTER IV

Shows that True Love is True Service

On the evening of the day upon which Laura was to have been married, Adams went, as usual, into his study and lit the green lamp upon his desk; but his mind was so filled with the mystery of her absence that even the pretence of distraction became unendurable. Since the news of her broken engagement and her flight had reached him, he had spent three days in a fruitless, though still hopeful, search for her; and the nights when he was forced to relax his efforts were filled with agonised imaginings of her loneliness at so great a distance and yet in reality so near. From the moment that he had heard through Gerty of her disappearance, there had ceased to exist all uncertainty as to the position in which he now stood to her; and he reproached himself, as he remembered her visit to his office, because he had failed then to take into his hands a decision which from an external view appeared so little to affect him.

But the external view, he realised, was nothing to him to-night. On that last day he had penetrated beneath the shallow surface of the conventions, and he had read in her tormented heart the whole story of the bitter disillusionment which she did not dare to put in words. Her imagination, he saw, had created an ideal lover in Kemper's shape, and in the

moment of her awakening she had turned away not from the falsehood, but from the truth. "Though he is not what I loved yet I will still love him!" her heart had cried, in a subjection to the old false feminine belief that faithfulness to a mistaken ideal is not weakness but virtue. Yet in the end she had fled from that ultimate choice between the higher and the lower nature. How could she have lived on a lie when her spirit had forged so clear a path of truth before her?

Rising from his chair he walked for a few minutes rapidly up and down the room. How far or how near was she to-night? Had she remembered him in her misery? Would God reveal Himself to her in the most terrible hour? His trust in her final deliverance was so great that even as he put the questions, he knew in his heart that she was one of those who, in the end, "win their own souls through perseverance." His eyes fell on her picture above his desk, and then turning away rested on Connie's which stood where he had placed it in the first years of his marriage. Connie and her life with him was like a half-forgotten dream to him now, yet, looking back upon it, he could not tell himself that there had been for him no gain of strength, for Connie no growth of understanding, in the pitiless failure of their marriage. All was softened in his memory by that last afternoon when he had seen the shame of experience wiped from her face as they combed her hair straight back from her forehead in the old childish fashion; and he had realised from that instant that a soul had come to birth in the hour before her death. A single ray of the divine light had dispelled the thick darkness, and

her blind eyes were opened for one minute before she closed them to the body forever. Was that one minute not worth every heart throb he had suffered and every difficult hope for which he had battled in his thoughts? Having looked though for a fleeting glimpse only upon the unity of life, was not her spirit's growth measured in the instant of that flashing vision? For God had worked here—had worked in the pity of his heart, as well as in the awakening gratitude in Connie's; and because of the deeper insight he had attained, he could look back over the whole sordid tragedy and discern one of those steep and arduous roads by which the spirit mounts to enlightenment through the flesh. And if this were so here—if in ugliness such as this he could find beauty, was it not one and the same over the broad field of human effort? Had not his own life proved to him that let a man's eyes be opened, and even in the depths of abasement he may look in his soul and discover God?

And Laura? His heart was flooded with tenderness, and he felt again a confident, an almost mystic assurance that her destiny was one with his. In this growing conviction his anxiety appeared to him suddenly as a pitiable and cowardly denial of his faith—and he was possessed by the certainty that he had only to send out his will in order to smooth the way of her return to peace.

The room had become warm, and opening the window he stood looking beyond the housetops to the stars which shone dimly over the city. The noise in the streets grew fainter in his ears, and as he stood there with his eyes on the stars, he could tell himself in the joy of his reconciliation, that the law by which

they moved gloriously toward their end was the law which controlled his own and Laura's life. The sense which is less a belief than an intimate knowledge of immortality belonged to him now, and he realised that so far as he lived at all he lived not in the hour alone, but in eternity, that so far as he had won peace it was bound up in a passionate conviction of the survival of the universe within his soul. To-day or to-morrow, in the minute or in eternity, he saw that wherever God is there will always be immortal life.

Turning back into the room he looked again at Laura's picture with a longing which had not freed itself as yet from the idea of renouncement. Even now he realised that he had been strong enough to live without her, and with the admission, he was aware again of that wider sympathy which had been his compensation in a forfeiture of personal love. His happiness he had told himself a year ago depended neither upon possession nor upon any passage of events, yet to-night his heart strained after her in a tenderness which seemed to bring her visible presence before him in the room. His love for her appeared not only as a part of his love for God, but as a part, also, of his sorrows, his bitter patience, his renouncement and of the compassion which had sprung from the agony and the enlightenment of his failure. Sorrow he could still feel—the deepest human grief might be his portion to-morrow, but while this unfading light shone in his soul, he knew that it was ordained that he should conquer in the end. By this knowledge alone he had at last won through suffering into the open places of the spirit where were joy and freedom.

A ring at the bell startled him from his abstraction, and with an impatient eagerness for news, he hastened to the door, where a boy thrust at him a small folded sheet of paper. As he opened it he felt that his hand trembled, for even before he read the words, he knew that Laura's appeal to him had come.

"I need a friend. Will you help me?" was all that she had written.

He motioned the boy to come inside, and then stood looking at him enquiringly as he got into his overcoat.

"Do you go back with me?" he asked.

The boy nodded while he pulled at a scarlet handkerchief about his neck. Adams noticed that though he was stunted and anæmic in appearance, he wore his shabby overcoat with an almost rakish swagger. His mouth was filled with chewing-gum which he rolled aside in his cheek when he talked.

"Is it far?" Adams enquired in a hopeless effort to extort information however meagre.

The boy looked important, almost mysterious.

"Yep," he responded, adding immediately, "She's the other side of the ferry."

"Do you mean the lady?" He opened the door, and hurried to the sidewalk where he stopped to call a cab from the corner.

"She's been there three nights, so tired she couldn't move," replied the boy, as he followed Adams into the cab. "A fine lady, too," he commented with a wink.

"Well, she's all right now, and I'm much obliged to you," said Adams, but he asked no further questions until they were seated side by side in the ferry,

when he tried again to draw out the bare facts of Laura's flight.

During the walk through the town and along the country road, he learned that Laura had reached the house of the boy's mother in an exhaustion of mind and body which had compelled them to harbour her for the night. On the next day her appearance and the money with which she was supplied had so won upon the mother's sympathy that her desire to remain a few days longer had been met almost with eagerness by the older woman. When he had, with difficulty, extracted this account of what had passed, Adams fell a little ahead of his companion, and they went on in silence until they came, at the end of several miles, in sight of the cottage withdrawn from the roadside in its clump of trees. A single lighted window was visible through the bared boughs, and standing out clearly from the interior, Adams saw a dark figure which his heart recognised with a bound.

The boy pushed back the gate and Adams went up the path inside, and entering the house opened the door of the room in which he had seen Laura standing. She was still there, motionless in the lamplight, and as he went toward her she lifted her eyes and gazed back at him in the mute defiance which is the outward expression of despair.

"Do you think you have been quite just to me, Laura?" he asked, not tenderly, but with a stern and reproachful face.

Without lowering her eyes she looked at him while she shook her head.

"I sent for you because I could not help it. I had nowhere to go," she said.

"Do you think you have been just to me?" he asked again.

"You? I never thought of you until to-day," she answered. "I came here because I had to go somewhere—it did not matter where. I was too tired to walk any farther, so they were very good to me."

"And you have let us search for you three days." His voice was constrained, but as he looked into her wan face between the loosened waves of her hair, his heart melted over her in an agony of tenderness. Every drop of blood appeared to have left her body, which was so pallid that he seemed to see the light shining through her drawn features.

"So they have been looking for me?" she observed, with but little interest.

"What did you expect?" he questioned in his turn.

"But I didn't want to be found—I would rather stay lost," she responded. Shrinking away from him she went to the window and stood there, pressed closely against the panes, as if in a blind impulse to put the space of the room between them. "I will not go back even now—I will not go back," she insisted.

As he entered he had closed the door behind him, and leaning against it now, he looked at her with a flicker of his quiet smile.

"I'm not talking about going back, am I?" he rejoined. "Heaven knows you may stay here if you like the place." He glanced quickly about the crudely furnished little room hung with cheap crayon portraits. "It's rather hard, though, to fit you into these surroundings," he remarked with a flash of humour.

She shook her head. "They suit me as well as any other."

"And the people who live here?—What of them?"

"I like them because they are so near to the ground," she answered, "they've no surface of culture, or personality, or convention to bother one—they've no surface, indeed, of any kind."

"Well, it's all very interesting," he remarked, smiling, "but, in common decency, don't you think you might have sent me word?"

"I never thought of you an instant," she replied.

"You never thought of me in your life," he retorted, "and yet when I say I'm better worth your thinking of than Kemper—God knows I don't pretend to boast."

A weaker man would have hesitated over the name, but he had seen at the first glance that the way to save her was not by softness, and his lips, after he had uttered the word, closed tightly like the lips of a surgeon who applies the knife.

"Don't speak to me of him!" she cried out sharply, "I had forgotten!"

Her eyes hung upon his in a returning agony, and it was through this agony alone that he hoped to bring back her consciousness of life.

"This is not the way to forget," he answered, "you are not a coward, yet you have chosen the cowardly means. There can be no forgetfulness until you are strong enough to admit the truth to your own heart—to say 'there is no mistake that is final, no wrong done that has power to crush me.'"

"But there is no truth in my heart," she answered, with sudden energy, "it is all a lie—I am a lie all over,

and it makes no difference because I have ceased to care. I used to think that people only died when they were put in coffins, but I know now that you can be dead and yet move and walk about and even laugh and pretend to be like all the rest—some of whom are dead also. And I didn't die slowly," she added, with a vague impersonal interest, which impressed him as almost delirious in its detachment, "I wasn't killed in a year, but in a minute. One instant I was quite alive—as alive as you are now—and the next I was as dead as if I had been buried centuries ago."

"And who is to blame for this?" he demanded, white to the lips.

"Oh, it wasn't he—it was life," she went on calmly, "he couldn't help it, nor could I—nobody can help anything. Do you understand that?" she asked, with the searching mental clearness which seemed always lying behind her dazed consciousness, "that we're all drawn by wires like puppets, and the strongest wire pulls us in the direction in which we are meant to go? It's curious that I should never have known this before because it has become perfectly plain to me now—there is no soul, no aspiration, no motive for good or evil, for we're every one worked by wires while we are pretending to move ourselves."

"All right, but it's my turn at the wire now," responded Adams, smiling.

At his words she broke out into little hard dry sobs, which had in them none of the softness of tears. "Nobody is to blame for anything," she repeated, still striving, in a dazed way, to be just to Kemper.

Even more than her face and her voice, this pathetic

groping of her reason, moved him into a passion of sympathy; and while he looked at her, he resisted an impulse to gather her, in spite of her coldness, against his breast.

"What is it, Laura, that has made you suffer like this?" he asked.

But his words made no impression upon her, perhaps because they could not penetrate the outer husk of deadness which enveloped her.

"Do you know what it is to feel ashamed?" she demanded suddenly, "to feel ashamed, not in a passing quiver, but in a settled state every instant that you live? Do you know what it is to have every sensation of your body merged into this one feeling of shame—to be ashamed with your eyes and hands and feet as well as with your mind and heart and soul? I could have stood anything but this," she added, pressing closer against the window.

An exclamation which was almost one of anger burst from him, and going to where she stood, he laid his hand upon her arm as if in the effort to recall her reason by physical force. But with his first touch his grasp lost its energy and grew gentle, for her anguish appeared to him, as he held her, to be only the instinctive crying out of a child that is hurt. His hold slipped from her arm, and taking her hands, he bent over and kissed them until they lay quiet in his own.

"Laura, do you trust my love for you?" he asked.

"I trust you, yes," she answered, "but not love—it is only one of the wires by which we are moved."

"Trust anything you please about me, so long as you trust—that is all I ask," he let her hands fall

from his and looked into her face. "Promise me that you will be here waiting when I return."

"There's no place for me to go—I shall be here," she answered.

Her eyes followed him with a pathetic child-like fear while he crossed the room and went out leaving her alone.

CHAPTER V

Between Laura and Gerty

Did he possess the strength as well as the love that she needed? Adams asked himself a little later as he walked back under the stars. He saw her as he had just left her—wan, despairing; so bloodless that the light seemed shining through her features, and then he remembered the radiant smile which she had lost, the glorious womanhood obscured now by humiliation. An assurance, in which there was almost exultation, flooded his thoughts, and he was aware that the passion he felt for her had been suddenly strengthened by an emotion of equal power—by the longing born in his heart to afford protection to whatever suffered within his sight.

Never for an instant, since he had entered the room where she retreated before him, had he doubted either his appointed mission or his power of renewal. His whole experience, he understood now, had directed him to this hour which he had not foreseen, and the worldly success for which he had once struggled meant to him at last only that he might bring hope where there was failure. Even Connie—her love, her tragic history, her pitiable reliance upon him at the end—showed to him in the aspect of a human revelation—for his fuller understanding of Connie had confirmed him in the patience by which

alone he might win back Laura to the happiness which she had lost.

The road stretching ahead of him was no longer obscured, but shone faintly luminous out of the surrounding darkness. Not the future alone but the desert places through which he had come had blossomed, and the beauty which was revealed to him at last was the beauty in all things that have form or being—in the earth no less than in the sky, in the flesh no less than in the spirit, for were not earth and flesh, after all, only sky and spirit in the making? The perfect plan, he had learned, in the end, is not for any part but for the whole.

Across the ferry, he found a cab which took him to Gerty's house, and in response to his message, she came down immediately, looking excited and perturbed, in an evening gown of black and silver.

"Have you brought me news of Laura?" she asked breathlessly. "Perry's dragging me to a dinner, but if she's ill, I can't go—I won't."

"Don't go," he answered, "she's not ill, but if she were it would be better. Will you come with me now and bring her back with you?"

Without replying to his question, she ran from the room and returned, in a moment, wearing a hat and a long coat which covered her black and silver dress.

"The carriage is waiting now," she said, "we can take it and let Perry go to his dinner in a cab."

"But—good Lord, Gerty — what am I to say to them?" demanded Perry while he shook hands with Adams. "I never could make up an excuse in my life, you know."

Then his eyes blinked rapidly and he fell back with

merely a muttered protest, for Gerty shone, at the instant, with a beauty which neither he nor Adams had ever seen in her before. The wonderful child quality softened her look, and they watched her soul bloom in her face like a closed flower that expands in sunlight.

"I don't know, my dear," she responded gently, and with her hand on Adams's arm, she ran down the steps and into the carriage before the door. As they drove away, she looked up at him with a tender little smile.

"I am so glad that she has you," she said.

"In having you, she has a great deal more."

"It is you who have done it all—you expected me to have courage, so I have it. Had you expected me to be cowardly, I should have been so."

"Well, I expect you to save her," he answered quietly.

"Does she need it? What was it? What does it mean?"

"You'll know to-night, perhaps. I shall never know, but what does it matter?"

"I saw Arnold to-day," she said, "he is terribly—terribly—" she hesitated for a word, "cut up about it. Yet he swears he can't for the life of him see that he was to blame. Had he been to blame, he says, he would have shot himself."

"Would he?" he remarked indifferently.

"He sails for Europe on Saturday—if he hears she's found."

He bit back an exclamation of anger.

"What, under heaven, has he to do with it?" he asked.

"A great deal, one would think. But have you seen her? Tell me of her."

"Be good to her," he answered, "she is in a hard place and needs a great deal of love."

"And we can give it to her, you and I?"

"Mine is hers already, if it's any help."

"Was it hers before she knew Arnold even?"

"Long before—before he or you or I were born."

"And does she understand?"

"She doesn't know—but what difference does that make?"

Her eyes, in the flickering light, gave him an impression of remoteness as of dim stars.

"I wonder how it feels to be loved like that?" she said, a little wistfully.

"You would never have cared for it," he answered, with a flash of his penetrating insight, "for the kind of man who could have loved you in that way you couldn't have loved."

"You mean that I was born to adore the god in the brute?" she asked.

"Oh, well, so long as it's the god!" he retorted laughing.

But she paid no heed to his remark, and drawing her coat about her as if she were cold, she sat in silence until the carriage was driven upon the ferry and they began the trip across.

"She came this way all alone and at night?" she said.

"How or why we shall probably never know entirely," he answered. "I doubt if she realised herself where she was going."

"It looks meaningless from a distance, but, I suppose, in reality, it was a courageous flight?"

"Yes, I think there was courage in it," he responded quietly.

She turned her eyes away, looking out as they drove through the open country upon the black fields and the stars. Neither of them spoke again until the carriage stopped and the footman jumped down to ask for some directions. Then as they drew up presently before the little gate, Adams helped her out and along the path into the house.

"She is in there," he said, pointing to a closed door, "when you see her you will understand."

"But you will come, too?" she asked, hesitating.

He shook his head. "Her heart is bleeding—it's a woman that she wants."

Then he opened the door, and pushing her gently inside, closed it after her.

At first Gerty could see but faintly by the light of a lamp which smoked, but as she went quickly forward, Laura rose from the sofa upon which she had been lying, and came a step to meet her.

"Why did you come? I didn't want you—I didn't want anyone," she said.

Before the hard tones of her voice, Gerty stood still, shrinking slightly away in her baffled splendour. Her heart strained toward her friend, yet when she tried to think of some comforting word that she might utter, she found only a vacancy of scattered phrases. What would words mean to Laura now? What word among all others was there that she could speak to her?

For a moment, groping blindly for light, she hesi-

tated; then her arms opened, and she caught Laura into them in spite of her feeble effort at resistance.

"Dearest! dearest! dearest!" she repeated, for she had found the word at last.

Partly because she was a woman and partly because of her bitter triumphs, she had understood that the wisdom in love is the only wisdom which avails in the supreme agony of life. Neither philosophy nor religion mattered now, for presently she felt that her bosom was warm with tears, and when Laura lifted her head, the two women kissed in that intimate knowledge which is uttered without speech.

CHAPTER VI

Renewal

In that strange spiritual death—which was still death though the members of her body lived—Laura seemed to lose gradually all personal connection with the events through which she had passed; and when after three months she turned again to look back upon them, she found that they stood out, clear, detached, and remote as the incidents of history. She was not only dead herself, but the whole world about her showed to her in a curious aspect of unreality, as if a thin veil obscured it; and there were moments when even Adams and Gerty seemed to her to be barely alive. To the last she had refused to return to Gramercy Park, and on the night that she reached Gerty's house she had been aware that she was slipping away from any actual contact with her former life. Her body might breathe and move, but her soul and even her senses had become inanimate, and she felt that they had ceased to take part in any words she uttered.

Though she had persistently denied herself to her aunts, she sent for Mr. Payne on the first day that she was able to sit up, and the only softness she showed was in answer to the compassionate kiss he placed upon her forehead.

"My child, my child, what did I tell you?" he asked gently.

"It is because of that I wanted to see you," she said, "because you are the only person, I believe, who can really understand."

"I think I can, my dear."

"You have had beautiful dreams, too, that were false ones?"

"It isn't that the dreams are false," he replied, "but that the stuff of this earth isn't the kind to grow illusions. They must either wither in the bud or be wrenched up root and branch."

"And there's only the ugly reality, after all?"

"There's only the reality, but it isn't ugly when one grows accustomed to it. You'll find it good enough for you yet, my child."

"No—no," she said, "I've always lived on pretty lies, I see that now—I've always had to find an outlet for my imagination, however false. My poetry was never more than this—it was all quotation—all a reflection of the things I had wanted to feel in life. I never wrote a sincere line," she added.

He pressed her hand—it was his way of showing that he loved her none the less because she was not a poet—and then as the unnatural wanness overspread her face, he went out softly, leaving her in Gerty's care. By different roads they had come at last to the same place in life—she with her blighted youth and he with his beautiful old age and his disappointed hopes.

With the beginning of the year Gerty went South with her, but the soft air or the cold made little difference to Laura, when, as she said, she could feel neither. There had been no outburst of grief; since the night when she had wept on Gerty's bosom, she had not shed a tear; and once when Gerty had alluded to Kemper

in her hearing, she had listened with the polite attention she might have bestowed upon the name of a stranger. At Gerty's bidding she came or went, admired or disapproved, but of her old impulsive energy there was so little left that Gerty sometimes wondered if her friend had really, as she insisted, "turned to stone." For Laura's face even had frozen until it wore the impassive smile of a statue, and there was in her movements and her voice something of the insensibility of extreme old age. She was no longer young, nor was she middle-aged; it was as if she had outlived, not only the emotions, but the years of life.

In April they came back again, and on the morning after their return Gerty paid a dejected visit to Adams in his office.

"I can do nothing with her—she's turned to stone," she said.

"Oh, she'll come alive again," he responded. "Where is she?"

"In Gramercy Park. It makes no difference to her now where she is, nor whether she sees Mrs. Payne or not. She even sits for hours and listens to Uncle Percival play upon his flute."

"It will be the death of her," he answered gravely. "Is there nothing we can do?"

"Nothing. I've done everything—she's really stone."

"Well, we'll bring her round," said Adams cheerfully; but when he saw Laura herself in the afternoon, he instinctively turned his eyes away from the frozen sweetness in her look. He was aware that she made an effort to be pleasant, but her pleasantness reminded him of an artificial light on a figure of snow.

"I had hoped you would grow stronger in the

South," he said, though all conversation seemed to him to have become suddenly the most impersonal thing on earth.

"But I am strong," she answered, "I am never ill a day."

"There's something about you, all the same, that I don't like," he responded frankly.

"I know," she nodded, smiling, "you aren't used to seeing a dead person walk about. But it's very comfortable when you grow accustomed to it," she added, with a laugh.

At this he would have brought a more intimate note into his voice, but she evaded his first hint of earnestness by a cynical little jest she had picked up from Gerty. Her intention—if she intended anything—he saw clearly now was to confine her perceptions to the immediate surface of life presented before her eyes. She spoke with animation of the country she had left, of Gerty's gayeties, of the wonderful brightness of the weather; but when by a more serious question he sought to penetrate below this fluency of words, he was repelled again by the impression of a mere hollow amiability in her manner. After a few casual remarks he left her with the most hopeless feeling he had known for months, and when, as the days went on, he endeavored fruitlessly to arouse in her a single sincere interest in human affairs, he found himself wondering if it were possible for any creature to be still alive and yet to resemble so closely a figure of marble. Day after day he came only to yield at last to his baffled efforts; and the thin cold smile with which she responded to his words appeared to him sadder than any passionate outburst of tears. Even Connie on

that last afternoon had seemed to him more human and less unapproachable than Laura now.

Through the spring he saw her almost every day, and when in June he put her on the train with Gerty for the Adirondacks, he came away with the clutch, as if from a hand of ice, at his heart. He had given her his best and yet he had not penetrated by word or look beneath the unnatural gentleness which enveloped her like an outer covering. Then his heart hardened and he felt that he cursed Kemper for the thing which he had killed.

Back again in the forest, under the green and gold of the leaves, Laura asked herself why the associations of that last summer failed so strangely to disturb her as she looked on the familiar road and mountains? A single year or a whole lifetime ago, it was all one to her now, and while she wandered along the paths down which she had walked with Kemper in the most blissful hours of her love, she found herself almost regretting that she had ceased to suffer—that since her heart was broken it had lost even the power to throb. In the city she had felt herself to be a part of the houses and the streets, and as perfectly indifferent to the passage of life as they; but here with her heart against Nature's she would have liked to pulsate with the other live things in the forest. For the first time for months she began as the days went by, to quicken to an interest in the songs of the birds, or the sunsets on the mountains, or the springing up of a new flower beside the doorstep. And as in every rebound of the emotions from extreme despair, her connection with life came at last through the eye of the mind rather than through the heart, and the

lesson was taught her neither by Gerty nor by Adams, but through an awakening to the beauty in the sights and the sounds of the green natural world about her.

Gerty had left her one afternoon, and as the cart drove away she went out of the house and sat down in the sun upon the roadside which bordered the edge of the wood. Behind her was the silence of the forest, and straight ahead the faint purple hills rose against a pale sky above which the white clouds sailed like birds. For a while she gazed with blind eyes at the view for the sake of which the spot was chosen, but the mountains and the sky left her unmoved, and leaning her arm presently upon the warm earth, she lay looking at a little blue flower blooming in the sand at her feet. Her shadow stretched beside her in the road, and it seemed to her that there was as little difference, save in her consciousness, between her and her shadow, as there was between her shadow and the flower. Even her love and her disillusion showed to her now as of no larger consequence than the wind blowing upon her shadow or the dew and the storm falling upon the flower. Then as the minutes passed and her gaze did not waver from the blue petals filled with sunshine, she was aware gradually, as if between dream and waking, of a peculiar deepening of her mental vision, until there was revealed to her, while she looked, not only the outward semblance, but the essence of the flower which was its soul. And this essence of the flower came suddenly in contact with the dead soul within her bosom, while she felt again the energy which is life flowing through her body. At this instant, by that divine miracle of resurrection she began to live anew—to live not her

old life alone, but a life that was larger and fuller than the one which had been hers. She began to live anew in herself as well as in the sky and in humanity and in the songs of birds; and in this ecstasy of recovered life, she felt her soul to be of one substance, not only with God and the stars, but with the flower and the child in the street as well. For that love which had recoiled from its individual object overflowed her heart again until she felt that it had touched the boundaries of the world.

When Adams saw her in the autumn, he discovered the change almost with the first touch of her hand. Not only the outward form, but the indwelling intellect was alive again, and all that reminded him of her past anguish were a deeper earnestness in her smile and a faint powdering of silver on the dark wing-like waves of her hair. That veiled joy which is the expression of the soul that has found peace shone in her face with a radiance which if less bright was to him more beautiful than the sparkling energy she had lost. For the life and the passion of her womanhood were still there, mellowed and ennobled by that shadow of experience without which mere beauty of feature had always seemed to him a meaningless and empty shape. His belief was justified forever in that instant, and he recognised in her then one of those nobler spirits who in passing through the tragedy of disillusionment drain from it the strength without the bitterness that is its portion.

"I want to work, to help," she said eagerly, almost with her first breath, and while he listened with a tenderness tinged with amusement, she described to him the elaborate plans she had made for going among

the poor. "It isn't that the poor need help any more than the rich," she added, "but the poor are the only ones that I can reach."

He nodded, smiling, while he watched the animated gestures of her hands. Her poetry, her groping for love, her longing at last to give help to the oppressed, each phase of thought or feeling through which she had passed, showed to him only as the effort of the soul within her to find expression. In this passionate search after the eternal upon earth was she not, in reality, only seeking in outward forms the thing which was herself?

"I will help you, of course," he answered, with a gravity which he found it difficult afterward to maintain, for from that moment she had thrown her heart into the work of uplifting until her whole existence appeared to round presently about this new point of interest. While he could follow her here, he waited almost impatiently for the reaction of her temperament which would bring her back to him, he felt, as inevitably as the changes of the seasons would bring the spring again to the earth.

On Christmas Eve she had arranged for some celebration among the poor on the East Side, and when they came away together, she asked him to take her to Gerty's house instead of to Gramercy Park. Then as they walked along the cross-town blocks from the elevated road, she alluded for the first time to the evening a year ago when he had found her in her deepest misery.

"I thought then that my life was over," she said, "but to-day I have put my foot upon my old grief and it has helped me to spring upward. The world is so

full for me now that I can hardly distinguish among so many vivid interests—and yet nothing in it is changed except myself. Do you know what it is to feel suddenly that you have found the key?"

"I know," he replied, "for I have found it, too, and it is love."

"Love for the world—for all mankind," she corrected. "No, don't look at me like that," she added, "I am perfectly happy to-day, but it is the happiness of freedom."

For a moment he did not answer; then he turned his eyes upon the bright pallor of her cheek showing above the dark furs she wore, and there was a smile in his eyes though his voice, when he spoke, was grave.

"Do you know what I have sometimes thought about that, Laura," he said, "it is that I all along, from first to last, have known your heart better than you knew it for all your desperate certainty."

"I never knew it," she responded; "I do not know it now."

"And yet I think I do," he answered.

She shook her head. "It is no longer a mystery—there is only light in it to-day."

"I never thought you loved Kemper," he went on. "What you built your dream upon was an imaginary image that wore his shape. In my heart, even when I stood aside—when I was forced to stand aside because of other claims upon me—I think I was sure all the time that your love was meant for me at last."

"For you? Oh, no, not now," she answered.

"It's a bold way of saying it, I suppose," he pursued, "here I am neither rich nor successful as the world counts these things—in debt probably for several

years to come, and with not so much as an athletic lustre to my name. It's not a cheerful picture I'm drawing, but because there's a struggle in it I am not afraid to ask you to come and share it. I wonder if you know how I have loved you, Laura."

"I have known since—since that night," she replied.

"The one argument I have to offer," he said, smiling, "is that in spite of the unpromising outlook, I happen to be the only man on earth who could make you happy."

"You might have been once," she responded.

"And if once, why not now? Is not forever as good as yesterday?"

"Do you know why?" she answered, turning upon him in sudden passion. "You think I am brave and yet I am afraid—afraid, though I won't admit it, every minute that I live. I walk the streets in terror of a memory."

"But I do not," he answered quietly. "Do you doubt my power to keep what I have won—my dearest?"

At the word the colour rose to her cheek, but as they reached Gerty's door, she stopped and put her hand into the one which he held out.

"Like everything else it has come too late," she said.

He shook his head, and then pressing her hand, let it fall.

"I can be patient a little longer," he responded before he turned away.

His words were still in her thoughts when she entered the house; and as she went quickly upstairs to Gerty's sitting-room, she wondered what counsel of indecision she would content herself with at last?

Then as she crossed the threshold into the warm firelight, she discovered that Gerty was absent and that Arnold Kemper was standing upon the hearth rug.

As he recognised her he came forward, smiling, and held out his hand.

"So we've met again, after all, Laura," he remarked, without embarrassment.

At the sound of his voice there had come a single high throb of her heart and immediately afterward she was aware of an exultation which showed in the uplifting of her head and in her shining eyes—for as she looked into his face she measured for the first time, the distance which divided her dream from her awakening.

"One always meets again, you know," she answered, "but if you're waiting for Gerty now, she is usually after time."

"Women always are," he commented gayly, with his foreign shrug.

The window was just behind him, and as he glanced out into the street, she looked at him in the puzzled wonder with which one seeks in unchanged features a discernible justification of a passion which is altered. Where was the power to-day against which her heart had beat so helplessly a year ago? Was it possible that she had felt the charm in this man who was already middle-aged, who was satisfied with the mere concrete form of life, and in whose eyes she could see now the heaviness which grows through self-indulgence? His old intimate smile, his disturbing ironic glance, even the quickening of his first passive interest into the emotional curiosity which was the strongest impulse his world-weariness had left alive—each and all of these effects which she remembered impressed

her as little to-day as did the bulky fascination of Perry Bridewell. When at last she could escape in the flutter of Gerty's entrance, she left the room and the house with a tremor of her pulses which was strangely associated with a delicious sense of peace—for this chance meeting had revealed to her not only Kemper but herself.

As she walked slowly toward the golden circle of the sky which was visible through the bared trees in the park, she recognised with every fibre of her body as unerringly as with her intellect that she had come at last into that knowledge which is the centre of outgoing life. And as Adams had seen in his deeper vision, that all life is an evolution into the consciousness of God, so she divined now through her mere vague instinct for light, that all emotion is but the blind striving of love after the consciousness of itself. Her whole experience flashed back before her, and in that swiftness of memory which prefigures either an accession of vitality or a tragic death, she understood that both her illusion and her disenchantment were necessary to the building of the structure within her soul. She had mounted by her mistake as surely as by her aspiration, and every pang which she had suffered was but the rending of the veil between her flesh and spirit.

Looking up as she walked she saw, without surprise, that Adams was standing under the bared trees before her; and with her first glance into his face she realised that there are moments charged with so deep a meaning that all explanations, all promises, all self-reproaches become only such vain and barren things as words.

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